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The Sports Fan Journey Ecosystem
Conceptualizing the Sports Fan Experience

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Abstract

Sports fandom is ubiquitous and generates significant economic value as well as personal and social benefits. It has become a focal point of research in sports consumer behavior, as sports actors seek to enhance the fan experience. However, to date, no comprehensive conceptualization of a journey through which fans build their experience exists. Dominant reductionistic and linear approaches examine isolated journeys and fail to address complex interaction effects, contributing to the current fragmentation of the sports consumption market. By treating fan experience as a complex adaptive system and synthesizing insights from service-dominant logic, sports consumer behavior, and customer experience management, this thesis will offer a remedy. Four core propositions emerge, suggesting that sticky journey dynamics drive escalating involvement (1) and that cyclical involvement fluctuations are essential to sustained fandom (2). Fan experience is built through numerous interrelated core product and product extension journeys, conceptualized as a sports fan journey ecosystem (3). Sport spectatorship interacts with sport participation, as both constitute the overall involvement with the sport (4). Based on the propositions, managerial recommendations to improve and de-fragment the sports fan experience will be provided. Finally, future research avenues inspired by the propositions will be outlined.

Sport-Fanschaften sind allgegenwärtig. Sie generieren erheblichen wirtschaftlichen Wert für Vereine, Unternehmen und die gesamte Volkswirtschaft sowie persönlichen und sozialen Nutzen für Fans. Da Sportakteure bestrebt sind, das Fanerlebnis zu verbessern, sind Fans zu einem Schwerpunkt der (Sport-)Konsumentenverhaltensforschung geworden. Bislang gibt es jedoch keine umfassende Konzeptualisierung der Reise, auf der sie ihre Erfahrungen sammeln. Dominante reduktionistische und lineare Ansätze untersuchen isolierte Reisen und vernachlässigen dabei komplexe Wechselwirkungen, was zur aktuellen Fragmentierung des Sportmarkts beiträgt. Indem das Fanerlebnis als komplexes, adaptives System behandelt und mit Einblicken aus der dienstleistungsorientierten Logik, dem (Sport-)Konsumentenverhalten und dem Kundenerlebnismanagement zusammengeführt wird, liefert diese Arbeit einen Lösungsansatz. Es ergeben sich vier Propositionen, die darauf hindeuten, dass eine klebrige Reise zu einer stärkeren psychologischen Verbindung führt (1) und dass zyklische Verbindungsschwankungen essenziell für nachhaltige Fanschaften sind (2). Das Fanerlebnis wird durch zahlreiche miteinander verbundene Kernprodukt- und Produkterweiterungsreisen gebildet, die als Sportfanreise-Ökosystem konzeptualisiert werden (3). Erfahrungen als Zuschauer interagieren mit Erfahrungen als Sportteilnehmer, da beide das Gesamtengagement für den Sport ausmachen (4). Auf Grundlage der Propositionen werden Empfehlungen zur Defragmentierung und zur Förderung von Fanerlebnissen gegeben. Abschließend werden zukünftige Forschungsansätze skizziert.

Keywords: *Fan Experience, Sticky Journeys, Customer Experience Management, Sports Consumer Behavior, Service-Dominant Logic, Complex Adaptive Systems*

Table of Contents

TABLE INDEX.....	I
FIGURE INDEX	II
ABBREVIATIONS INDEX.....	III
AI DISCLAIMER.....	IV
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. SPORTS CONSUMER BEHAVIOR.....	3
2.1 SERVICE-DOMINANT LOGIC	3
2.2 THE SPORTS MARKET	6
2.3 THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS	7
2.4 THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTINUUM MODEL	9
2.4.1 THE PCM STAGES	10
2.4.2 PCM STAGE PROGRESSION AND SEGMENTATION	14
2.4 MOTIVATION	17
2.5 ATTITUDE FORMATION	21
2.6 IDENTIFICATION THEORIES	23
3. THE SPORTS CONSUMER EXPERIENCE	27
3.1 CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE	27
3.2 THE CUSTOMER PURCHASE JOURNEY	30
3.3 COMPLEXITY THEORY & COMPLEX ADAPTIVE SYSTEMS.....	36
3.4 SMOOTH AND STICKY JOURNEYS.....	38
4. CONCEPTUALIZING THE SPORTS FAN EXPERIENCE	44
4.1 THE PROPOSITIONS	44
4.2 MANAGERIAL RECOMMENDATIONS.....	58
4.2.1 RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON PROPOSITION 1	58
4.2.2 RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON PROPOSITION 2	60
4.2.3 RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON PROPOSITION 3	61
4.2.4 RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON PROPOSITION 4	65
5. CONCLUSION.....	67
5.1 SUMMARY	67

5.2 LIMITATIONS	67
5.3 CONTRIBUTION TO SPORTS MANAGEMENT.....	68
5.4 FUTURE RESEARCH.....	69
REFERENCES.....	71

Table Index

Table 1: The Five Axioms of Service-Dominant Logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2017, p. 47)	4
Table 2: Unique Aspects of Sport Consumption (Alexandris et al., 2022, p. 4)	6
Table 3: Differences between Repertoire and Subscription Markets (Alexandris et al., 2022, p.36)	7
Table 4: Items for PCM Involvement Facets (based on Kunkel et al., 2013, p. 182)	15
Table 5: Staging algorithm for PCM (based on Beaton et al., 2009, p. 188)	16
Table 6: Theoretical Distribution of Involvement Profiles across PCM stages (based on Beaton et al., 2009, p. 189)	16
Table 7: Personal Investment Theory - Definitions and Examples (based on Alexandris et al., 2022, p. 145)	20
Table 8: SPEED Motives (based on Alexandris et al., 2022, p. 147)	20
Table 9: Historical Perspective on Customer Experience in Marketing (based on Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, pp. 71 – 75)	27
Table 10: A Comparison of the Smooth and Sticky Journey Models (based on Siebert et al., 2020, p. 49)	41
Table 11: The Propositions	58
Table 12: Managerial Recommendations based on the Propositions	66

Figure Index

Figure 1: The Narrative and Process of Service-Dominant Logic (based on Vargo & Lusch, 2016, p. 7)	6
Figure 2: A Sport Consumer Behavior Model (based on Alexandris et al., 2022, p. 14)	8
Figure 3: The Psychological Continuum Model (based on Beaton et al., 2009, p. 180)	9
Figure 4: Stages of Attitudinal and Behavioral Engagement in the PCM Framework (based on Funk et al., 2011, p. 272).....	10
Figure 5: PCM Stage Management Strategies (based on Alexandris et al., 2022, p. 122)	13
Figure 6: The Fan Lifecycle Model (based on Tamir, 2022, p. 7)	14
Figure 7: The Self-Determination Continuum (based on Gagné & Deci, 2005, p. 336; Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 72)	18
Figure 8: Personal Investment Theory (based on Alexandris et al., 2022, p. 142)	19
Figure 9: Three Hierarchies of Effects (based on Solomon, 2020, p. 293).....	21
Figure 10: Simplified Depiction of the ELM (based on Petty & Cacioppo, 1986, p. 126; Inspired by Auer-Zotlöterer ´s consumer behavior course at the University of Vienna)..	22
Figure 11: The Theory of Planned Behavior (based on Ajzen, 1991, p. 182).....	23
Figure 12: The Concept of Integrated Fan Identity (based on Chun & Sagas, 2022, p. 52)	25
Figure 13: The Sport Experience Design Framework (based on Alexandris et al., 2022, p. 9)	30
Figure 14: Process Model for Customer Journey & Experience (based on Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 77; Notion of co-owned touchpoints is based on own theorizing)	31
Figure 15: Conceptual Framework for Channel Choice (based on Welf & Steul-Fischer, 2023 p. 1599)	32
Figure 16: Journey Map for Attending an NHL Game without Internet-Based Technology (based on Alexandris et al., 2022, p. 313)	33
Figure 17: Journey Map for Attending an NHL Game with Internet-Based Technology (based on Alexandris et al., 2022, p. 314)	34
Figure 18: Service Blueprint Components (based on Bitner et al., 2008, p. 73).....	35
Figure 19: A Visualization of the Smooth and Sticky Journey Models (based on Siebert et al., p. 50).....	39
Figure 20: Sustaining Customer Journeys in Multiservice Ecosystems (based on Siebert et al., 2020, p. 59).....	42
Figure 21: Structuration Theory (based on Whittington et al., 2025, p.116)	46
Figure 22: A Simplified Sports Fan Journey Ecosystem.....	49
Figure 23: Sport Brand Involvement Matrix (based on Kunkel et al., 2013, p. 185)	53
Figure 24: Visualized Core Product Journey Interactions	54
Figure 25: Sport Participation and Spectatorship constitute the overall Sport Involvement	56

Abbreviations Index

A2A: Actor to Actor

B2B: Business to Business

B2C: Business to Customer

CAS: Complex Adaptive System

CRM: Customer Relationship Management

CJ: Customer Purchase Journey

CX: Customer Experience

C2C: Customer to Customer

DM: Decision-Making

ELM: Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion

FJE: Fan Journey Ecosystem

IFT: Identity Fusion Theory

PCM: Psychological Continuum Model

PI: Personal Identity

RI: Role Identity

SCB: Sport Consumer Behavior

SDN: Service-Delivery Network

SDT: Self-Determination Theory

SIT: Social Identity Theory

S-D Logic: Service-Dominant Logic

WoM: Word of Mouth

AI Disclaimer

Perplexity Pro was used to generate new ideas, to produce broad topic overviews, identify important literature, discuss conceptual ideas, and obtain feedback. Figures 19 and 20 were partially generated by Perplexity Pro. Grammarly was used to check the text

1. Introduction

Sports fandom is ubiquitous. According to insights from a 2022 survey covering 18 markets and more than 19.000 participants worldwide, 74% of individuals aged 18 to 24 reported being sports fans. Although this number declines across age groups, even in the oldest one (55+), more than 60 percent self-identified as fans. (YouGov, 2023) In absolute numbers, this seems even more staggering. According to their respective international governing bodies, it is estimated that football has 5 billion (FIFA, 2021), and basketball, 3.3 billion fans (FIBA, 2024). The term "fan" was coined by journalists in the late nineteenth century to describe devoted followers of popular theater and professional sports. (Gray & Ouellette, 2017). Throughout this thesis, it will be used exclusively to describe the latter. A popular definition of a sports fan defines them as *"an enthusiastic devotee of some particular sports consumptive object."* (Hunt et al., 1999, p. 440) This enthusiastic devotion can lead to three unique features in fans as consumers. They, for example, possess a strong emotional attachment to the consumption object, exhibit several loyalty behaviors, and engage in informal membership behaviors, such as co-creating content. It has been widely recognized that sports fans differ in their level of commitment, ranging from temporary, fair-weather fans to highly fanatical fans, whose fandom is central to their self-identity. (Samra & Wos, 2014)

Fandom can offer many benefits. It should be noted that there are some concerns, especially with aggressive behavior (Grodecki & Rookwood, 2025) and increased stress levels (Maturana et al., 2021; Newson et al., 2020) among highly identified fans. However, the pros outweigh the cons. Studies ascribe spectatorship and fandom to an increased subjective and social well-being (Guo et al., 2024; Wann et al., 2011) and reduced loneliness (Keyes et al., 2022). It can be used to build social capital (Sánchez-Santos et al., 2024), foster social cohesion across borders (Biel, 2025) and improve civic participation (Ash Center, 2025). It also translates to economic value. The global professional sports market is currently valued at around 417 billion dollars and expected to grow to \$602 billion by 2030 (Kearney, 2025). The revenue in 2024 of the four biggest American sports leagues (NFL, MLB, NBA, NHL) alone is estimated to be over €54 billion (PEAK, 2025), with the European football market accounting for almost another €40 billion throughout the 2024/25 season (Deloitte, 2025). Needless to say, there are many other leagues (e.g., the UFC) and events (e.g., international competitions) that attract significant attention. The backbone of this industry are highly engaged fans, which provide sports organizations with access to various revenue streams, such as media rights, ticket & merchandise sales, and sponsorships.

Given the substantial societal and economic influence of sports fandom, as well as its unique consumption characteristics, it is unsurprising that sports consumption has become a focal point of consumer research, thereby giving rise to the field of sports consumer behavior (Alexandris et al., 2022). Sport organizations can use findings from

this marketing domain to enhance the fan experience. Customer experience literature views experience as the *“cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensorial, and social responses to a firm’s offering during the customer’s entire purchase journey.”* (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 71) To determine critical touchpoints that elicit these emotions, many firms map their customer journeys (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). However, the literature is dominated by reductionistic, linear approaches that fail to conceptualize the fan experience and its journey (Mele et al., 2025). Current approaches look at isolated journeys (e.g., a game day experience) and thereby neglect important interrelated properties of fans, such as the psychological connection to the fan object (Funk & James, 2001) as well as many-to-many relationships with other fans and service providers, which result in complex interactions (Sturmberg, 2018). Because sports consumption often occurs across multiple channels, this creates fragmented consumption opportunities, which industry leaders have identified as a key challenge (PEAK, 2025). Gen Z fans, for example, follow teams and athletes across three to five digital platforms, which are, however, typically treated as silos (Deloitte, 2023). This leaves questions, such as: “How does the encounter with one provider influence the experiences with others?” and “How does fan involvement interact with designed service experiences?” By treating the fan journey as a complex adaptive system (Turner & Baker, 2019), this thesis aims to understand these interaction effects and thereby contribute to the de-fragmentation of consumption opportunities and an overall enhanced fan experience. By integrating established insights from service-dominant logic, sports consumer behavior, customer experience management, and complexity theory, four propositions will be made. Together, they conceptualize the fan experience as a complex sports fan journey ecosystem, comprising multiple, dynamically interrelated journeys. The proposed concept can guide new practices for industry professionals and inspire future empirical research.

To lay the foundation for conceptualizing the sports fan experience, service-dominant logic will be introduced first. It is the meta-theoretical lens that is applied to examine the sports consumption market. After elaborating on key aspects of the sports market and its products, this thesis will present insights into sports consumer behavior, namely theories of fan involvement, motivation, attitudes, and identity. They will clearly demonstrate unique consumption characteristics, as well as the psychological and sociological processes that shape the experience. Next, general customer experience literature will be presented and enriched with findings specific to sport consumption. To illustrate the shortcomings of current approaches in managing customer experiences, complexity theory will be introduced. Subsequently, Siebert et al.’s (2020) smooth & sticky journey concept, which offers the key to de-fragmenting the market, is explained. By synthesizing previous insights, the fan experience will be conceptualized, and subsequently, suitable recommendations will be provided.

2. Sports Consumer Behavior

To enhance the fan experience, it is essential to understand sports consumer behavior (SCB) and the unique characteristics of the sports market. SCB developed from general consumer behavior research and can be defined as *“the cognitive and behavioral responses that occur before, during, and after buying and using a sport product.”* (Alexandris et al., 2022, p. 9) A sport product in this case equals any product, good, service or experience related to sports. The field emerged from the notion that sport products have unique consumption characteristics. (Alexandris et al., 2022) The following chapter will provide a brief overview of the most important theories. Some important factors influencing SCB (e.g., personality or demographics) will be excluded because they are not necessary to establish the propositions. The presented body of work will not be critically examined or discussed, as it is largely well established and a full review would be beyond the scope. Instead, the chapter highlights basic consumption patterns, establishing a foundation for subsequent recommendations on designing a multi-journey fan experience.

After introducing service-dominant logic as the meta-theoretical perspective for this thesis (Chapter 2.1), the unique characteristics of the sports market (Chapter 2.2) will be described. The following section (Chapter 2.3) describes how attitudes and behaviors vary with the psychological connection to the fan object. Chapters 2.4 and 2.5 introduce theories of motivation and attitudes to explain the psychological processes underlying attitudinal and behavioral change. Lastly, Chapter 2.6 will detail the social influences on sports fans through identification theories.

2.1 Service-Dominant Logic

This thesis examines the sports consumption market through the lens of service-dominant logic. In one of the most influential marketing articles of all time, Vargo & Lusch (2004) challenged the conventional good-centric mindset on how value is created and exchanged. The traditional view of markets posits that tangible output is the ideal form of exchange and holds that value is created during manufacturing processes, distributed through the market, and ultimately destroyed during consumption. In contrast, Vargo & Lusch (2004) propose that economic and social processes are based on service exchanged for service, shifting the focus towards relationships, the cocreation of value, and intangible resources. The logic is built on 11 foundational premises, five of which were elevated to axioms (see Table 1) (Vargo & Lusch, 2017).

The Five Axioms of S-D-Logic	
<i>Axiom 1</i>	Service is the fundamental basis of exchange
<i>Axiom 2</i>	Value is cocreated by multiple actors, always including the beneficiary
<i>Axiom 3</i>	All social and economic actors are resource integrators
<i>Axiom 4</i>	Value is always uniquely and phenomenologically determined by the beneficiary
<i>Axiom 5</i>	Value cocreation is coordinated through actor-generated institutions and institutional arrangements

Table 1: The Five Axioms of Service-Dominant Logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2017, p. 47)

The first axiom states that the fundamental basis of exchange is service (Vargo & Lusch, 2017). In S-D logic, service is defined as “*the application of specialized competences (knowledge and skills) through deeds, processes, and performances for the benefit of another entity or the entity itself.*” (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, p. 2) To better understand why the axiom states that not goods but services are central to exchange, it is helpful to define resources. Traditionally, they were viewed as limited and static “stuff” that could be captured to gain an advantage. Over time, this view shifted, and resources started to be seen as something that becomes, meaning basically that everything is neutral until we understand what to do with it. This led to the classification of operand (acted upon to produce an effect) and operant resources (used to act on operand resources to produce the effect). In the traditional goods-centered view, operand resources are primary, and wealth is determined by ownership over these finite, natural resources. Operant resources were valued according to their ability to convert an operand resource into an output at the lowest possible cost. Only recently have operant resources assumed a greater role, as we have come to recognize that skills and knowledge are actually the most valuable resources. This is especially evident in high-tech products. While the operand resources used in smartphones have been known for centuries, only the applied skills & knowledge (operant resources) can convert them into a technical product. This shift in focus encourages us to view intangible service aspects as the fundamental source of strategic benefit, even for heavily tangible products. Goods are regarded as a means of distributing service, not as the primary locus of value. (Vargo & Lusch, 2004) A fan does not buy team merchandise solely for the fabric, but for the services that were applied to it (e.g., embedded cultural value through team performance and branding efforts).

The second axiom states that multiple parties, including the beneficiary, co-create value. This means that value is not delivered by a single actor but rather emerges from interactions. (Vargo & Lusch, 2017) A straightforward example of this is a fan attending a live game. Value is not created solely by the traditional producer (a sports team), but also by all fans in attendance, who contribute to a unique atmosphere and the overall experience. In fact, research shows that fans can help their team win (Arrondel et al., 2023), reflecting the well-documented phenomenon of home advantage. This again implies that indirect exchange is fundamental in cocreating value (Brodie et al., 2019). Through the third axiom, S-D logic fully moves away from the notion that producers create value and consumers destroy it. Instead, all actors are regarded as fundamentally and functionally similar entities that engage in economic exchanges as resource integrators.

Through this, the originators of the theory depart from viewing business networks as B2B/B2C/C2C to describing them as A2A, actor-to-actor networks. This does not mean that every actor is treated as identical; rather, the opposite is true. Each actor integrates resources from other actors to create value for themselves and others. Players, for example, use vastly different resources to create value on a game day than fans. This leads right into the 4th axiom, according to which the beneficiary uniquely and phenomenologically determines the value. The value of anything differs across actors because each integrates a unique combination of resources to generate it. The notion that value is determined phenomenologically emphasizes that valuation is grounded in personal, subjective experience rather than objective measures. A long-term hardcore fan will have different experiences and resources to draw on and thus derive different value from attending a final game than someone who attends only out of interest in the spectacle. The last axiom states that the entire value cocreation is coordinated through actor-generated institutions that are part of wider institutional arrangements. (Vargo & Lusch, 2017) Institutions come in the form of interdependent structures, such as rules, norms, meanings, symbols, and practices (Vargo & Lusch, 2016), that can constrain or enable agency (Whittington, 2025). Examples include officiating rules set by a league, requirements for joining a fan club, or the distribution of exclusive image rights through partner networks. A full elaboration on the structuring power of institutions will follow in Chapter 4.1.

Finally, it is important to note that these axioms point S-D logic toward a systems-thinking perspective, in which actors engage in a dynamic, structured network to create value for one another, themselves, and the viability of a broader system (Jaakkola et al., 2024). Through service exchanges, fans can enhance overall experiences (e.g., fan choreography, memes), contribute to the team's success (Arrondel et al., 2023), and even have a societal impact (Ash Center, 2025; Biel, 2025). This led the authors of S-D logic to propose the concept of service ecosystems, defined as *“a relatively self-contained, self-adjusting system of resource integrating actors connected by shared institutional arrangements and mutual value creation through service exchange.”* (Vargo & Lusch, 2016, pp. 10–11). This narrative of value cocreation is illustrated in Figure 1 and encourages the examination of sports market consumption across different, interrelated levels of overlapping service ecosystems (Vargo & Lusch, 2016).

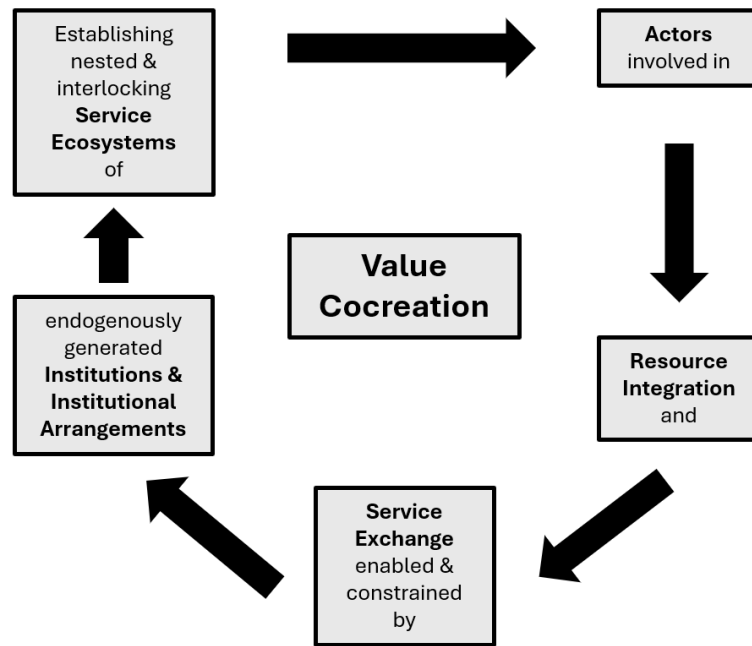


Figure 1: The Narrative and Process of Service-Dominant Logic (based on Vargo & Lusch, 2016, p. 7)

2.2 The Sports Market

Consumption in the sports market often differs from consumption in other markets. It can be experiential and subjective, elicits a range of intense emotions and passion, involves uncertainty regarding outcomes, and comprises multiple transactions and interactions over an extended period (see Table 2). (Alexandris et al., 2022)

Unique Aspects of Sports Consumption			
Can be experiential and subjective, with consumers placing different meanings on similar product attributes and experiences.	Creates a range of intense emotions, drama, and passion from athletic competition and participation.	Includes multiple transactions and interactions with the organization that can occur over an extended period.	Has an element of uncertainty in terms of the outcome from buying and using the product, which is desirable.

Table 2: Unique Aspects of Sport Consumption (Alexandris et al., 2022, p. 4)

While markets are often classified as repertoire or subscription markets (see Table 3), both types are present in the sports industry. In repertoire markets (e.g., merchandise, ticket buying), consumers often purchase without being highly involved in decision-making, have a large repertoire from which to choose, and rely on informal relationships. In subscription markets (e.g., broadcasting services, season tickets), purchases are infrequent and limited to a small number of brands, decisions require greater involvement and often involve formal contracts. It is interesting to examine their relationship in a sports context, because subscriptions can entail greater risks, with consumers often unable to trial the product before committing to a long-term relationship. In the case of fans, however, it is likely that, before buying a season ticket in a subscription market, they have previously purchased at least one single-game ticket in a repertoire market, thereby reducing the perceived risk. (Alexandris et al., 2022)

Characteristic	Repertoire Market (e.g., Merchandise)	Subscription Market (e.g., Streaming Service)
<i>Frequency of purchase</i>	Purchased often	Purchased infrequently (annually or seasonally)
<i>Number of brands bought</i>	Consumers buy many brands over time (large repertoire)	Few brands bought (small repertoire)
<i>Nature of the relationship</i>	Informal relationships	Often, formal contracts
<i>Degree of involvement</i>	Often, low consumer involvement	Often, high consumer involvement

Table 3: Differences between Repertoire and Subscription Markets (Alexandris et al., 2022, p.36)

Furthermore, it is important to divide the sport product into the core product and product extensions. The core product (e.g., the contest itself and its outcome) is the primary reason consumers engage in the offering. (Alexandris et al., 2022) It should be noted that these usage encounters can be further subdivided into encounters with the sport itself and social encounters, in the form of fan-to-fan interactions, highlighting the social nature of sport consumption (Yoshida, 2017). Thus, the benefits sought after differ between individuals (e.g., socialization or entertainment motives). However, the core product is often difficult to control due to the inherent uncertainty of sport competitions and social interactions. Product extensions are the other influences affecting the experience. They are often easier to manage and thus able to compensate for variability in the core product. On one hand, they can be tangible products, relating to elements that consumers can see and touch (e.g., physical facilities, communication materials, brand identifiers), making the core product accessible and perceivable. On the other hand, they can be augmented products (e.g., convenience & support services, community features, hospitality), supplementary offerings that enhance the overall experience. (Alexandris et al., 2022) Because the core products of many competing sport organizations (e.g., professional soccer teams) are similar or identical, product extensions are crucial for creating a competitive advantage. After introducing the overarching lens of this thesis and elucidating the unique aspects of the sports market and its products, the following chapters examine the psychological processes that shape the fan experience.

2.3 The Decision-Making Process

As introduced earlier, each fan is a resource integrator that uniquely and phenomenologically determines value. When encountering a sport product, fans get influenced and constrained in their decision-making (DM) by interrelated personal, psychological, social, and contextual factors (see Figure 2) (Alexandris et al., 2022).

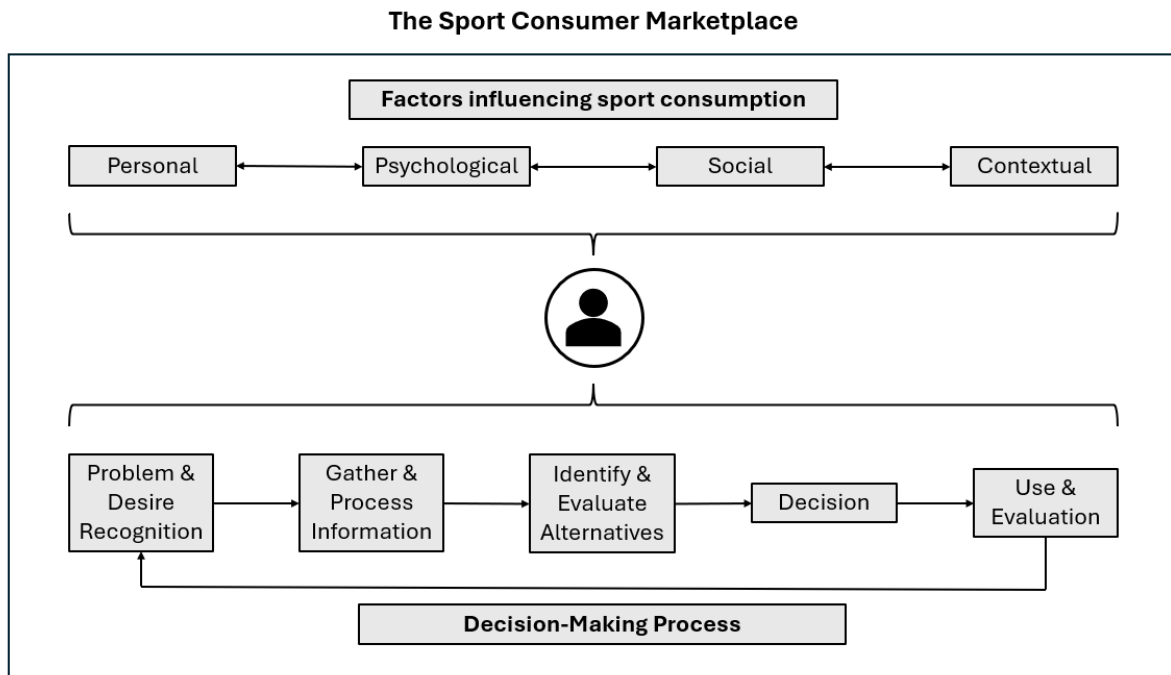


Figure 2: A Sport Consumer Behavior Model (based on Alexandris et al., 2022, p. 14)

Contextual factors are the circumstances encountered by the fan during sports consumption (e.g., physical and virtual environments, temporal conditions). Social factors (e.g., cultural values, family influences, peer group affiliations) shape customs, knowledge, and beliefs about appropriate consumption. The cognitive processes that influence consumption, such as biases, attitudes, and motivation, constitute psychological factors. Lastly, personal factors are individual characteristics, such as income, life stage, health, or gender, that influence the sequential five-stage DM process (see Figure 1). In the following, the DM process will be explained through the example of a fan recognizing his desire to stream games. The consumer recognizes the problem or desire (e.g., the lack of online, on-demand access to games). They then gather information from internal (e.g., past experiences with streaming providers) and external (e.g., friends or commercial & public information) sources. After processing the information, the fan identifies and evaluates various providers. Based on different criteria (e.g., price, quality, broadcasting style), the set of potential options is reduced to a consideration set (e.g., SKY and DAZN included; ESPN and Prime Video excluded). The final decision is made by applying DM rules, such as a cutoff point for each criterion (e.g., price too high or streaming quality too low), or by weighing specific features by importance (e.g., a fan wants a high-quality streaming experience but is price-sensitive). The transactional exchange takes place during this stage. Finally, the consumer uses and evaluates the product, often based on whether the consumption exceeded, met, or failed to meet the expectations. The use and evaluation stage influences future decisions. Thus, a feedback loop exists, represented by the bottom arrow (see Figure 2). Overall, stage sizes vary depending on factors such as the personal importance of the decision or biases (e.g., brand preference). (Alexandris et al., 2022)

2.4 The Psychological Continuum Model

As shown earlier, value determination is unique and phenomenological, meaning that each fan experiences the same interaction differently. An important factor in evaluating a fan experience is the personal connection to the fan object. The most common method for segmenting fans based on their psychological connection is the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) proposed by Funk & James (2001). The authors identified four hierarchical stages, called “Awareness”, “Attraction”, “Attachment”, and “Allegiance”. (see Figure 3) (Beaton et al., 2009).

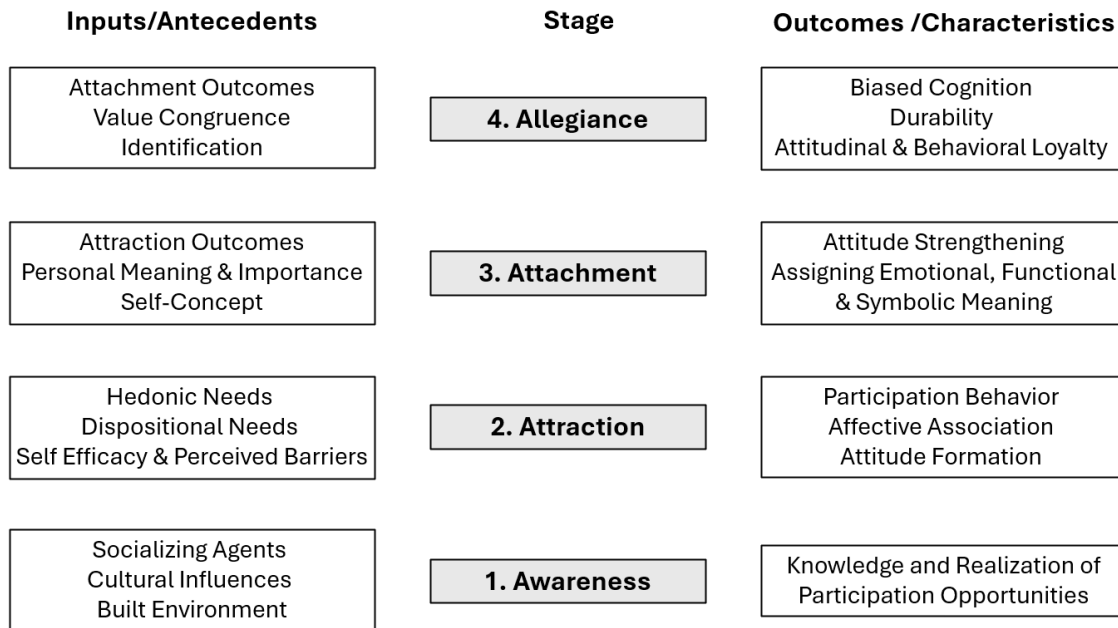


Figure 3: The Psychological Continuum Model (based on Beaton et al., 2009, p. 180)

Each entails distinct antecedents as well as cognitive and emotional responses, which will be explained in detail in Chapter 2.4.1. Early influences are driven by extrinsic factors, whereas the final stage results in internal consistency. (Beaton et al., 2009) Individuals progress through stages at their own pace and may even revert to a previous one. Most consumers actually remain at lower stages, never reaching “Allegiance”. (Funk & James, 2016) A stronger connection is characterized by greater attitudinal engagement (reflected in resistance to change, enduring involvement, and future intentions) and behavioral complexity (e.g., annual expenditure, participation, or media and merchandise use) (see Figure 4) (Funk et al., 2011).

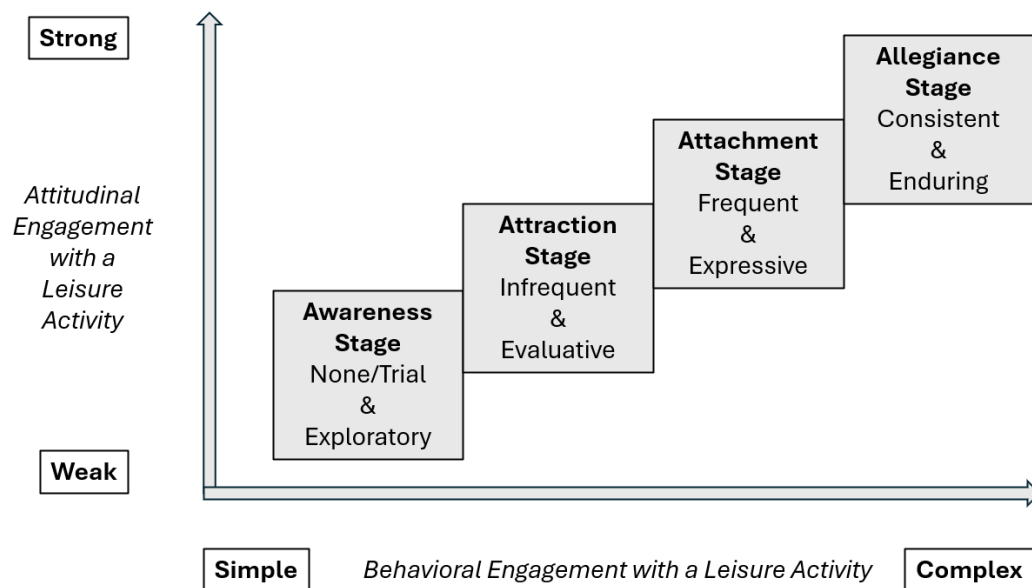


Figure 4: Stages of Attitudinal and Behavioral Engagement in the PCM Framework (based on Funk et al., 2011, p. 272)

Therefore, more strongly connected individuals should have a higher potential for value co-creation through resource integration. This goes hand in hand with the Pareto principle, proposing that the heaviest 20% of buyers are responsible for 80% of sales and vice versa (Alexandris et al., 2022). The principle suggests that most of the customer segment could be ignored without incurring excessive financial loss. In reality, although a small percentage of users generate a large share of the brand ´s revenue, this distribution is not as skewed as the principle suggests. Sharp (2010) stresses that light customers should not be neglected. He theorizes that, on average, 20% of customers account for 50% of sales, 30% of medium buyers account for 30% of sales, and the 50% lightest buyers account for 20% of sales. Thus, the author suggests that the bottom 80% account for 50% of revenue, rather than the previously proposed 20%. This shows that not only the most identified fans but also those in early PCM stages are crucial to success.

2.4.1 The PCM Stages

The PCM suggests that the relationship to a recreational or a sport activity is built through the combination of sociological and psychological processes (Beaton et al., 2009). The following subchapter, which relates to Figure 3, describes each stage and provides recommendations for managing them.

1. Awareness Stage:

The first step in becoming a fan is recognizing that the team exists (e.g., “I know about the L.A. Lakers”). Awareness is raised through external factors, mostly initial exposure and socializing agents (Funk et al., 2011). These agents vary by context and culture and include, for example, parents & other family members, peers, mass media, and school- or community-based programs (Funk et al., 2011; Funk & James, 2016). This results in knowledge about the fan object (e.g., distinguishing between sports/teams) and the realization of participation opportunities. At this stage, the individual is aware but has not yet formed a preference for a team and is not considering active engagement in

consumption (Funk & James, 2016). Behavior is either random, unplanned, or non-existent (Funk et al., 2011). The growing influence of social media in facilitating random, unplanned interactions through algorithms should be mentioned. Continued socialization is expected to stimulate attitude formation and trigger a transition to the next stage (Funk et al., 2011).

At the awareness stage, it is all about getting noticed. Sport organizations should aim for two things when targeting consumers at this stage. They must convert unaware individuals to aware ones and expand the knowledge of already aware individuals. Teams should engage in public discourse through socializing agents that hold cultural and/or social significance. Mass media and word of mouth (WoM) can generate exposure. Advertising strategies should stray away from a sales perspective and rather adopt an educational one, thereby increasing knowledge about the team. (Alexandris et al., 2022) Fans should get to know the team and the players, who are at this stage merely an amorphous, faceless group (Lock et al., 2012). Especially the co-creation of freely available online content that potential consumers identify with is essential, even if topics do not directly create sales opportunities. (Alexandris et al., 2022)

2. Attraction Stage:

In the attraction stage, individuals build a preference towards the team (e.g., “I like the L.A. Lakers”), realizing they can fulfill hedonic (e.g., excitement, escape) and dispositional needs (e.g., achievement, belongingness) through sports consumption (Funk & James, 2016). In addition, behavior largely depends on environmental factors, self-efficacy, and navigating perceived barriers (Beaton et al., 2009). Through participation, a positive attitude can form (Funk & James, 2016). The psychological connection at the attraction stage, however, is weak and unstable, and participation rather resembles trial behavior. (Alexandris et al., 2017), resulting in “fair weather fans”. An individual who has become an attracted fan of a local team might disengage when moving to another city, due to limited engagement opportunities. Bandwagon fans, who solely support a team because of their current success, but leave when the performance drops, (Wang et al., 2020) can also find themselves at this stage. During attraction processes, socializing agents and other extrinsic factors remain important, particularly in the beginning. However, as the psychological connection strengthens, individual psychological processes push sociological ones into the background, enabling movement to the attachment stage. (Funk & James, 2016)

At the attraction stage, it is all about generating interest and converting potential customers into actual customers. To build awareness, organizations should aim to create trial and sales opportunities by reducing customer attrition, attracting new customers, and increasing business with existing customers. Advertising strategies should support customers’ DM processes by communicating the potential benefits of the sports product, with websites and apps as crucial touchpoints. Promotions (e.g., discounts, free merchandise), interactive events, social media competitions, partnerships, service quality, and the use of innovative technology can fulfill hedonic and dispositional needs. (Alexandris et al., 2022) Social media can play a crucial role in customer conversion, with

a recent study finding that social media use mediates the relationship between sports fans' curiosity and impulse buying behavior (Chen et al., 2025).

3. Attachment Stage:

If a fan is categorized into the attachment stage, a meaningful, stable psychological connection with the team has been built (e.g., “I am a L.A. Lakers Fan”), and the fan object takes on personal meaning & importance, becoming non-substitutable (Funk & James, 2016). Behavior at this stage is mostly contingent on intrinsic motives (Funk & James, 2001; Funk & James, 2006). Attached fans identify with their fandom to the extent that they view it as an important part of their personal self-concept (Alexandris et al., 2017). This stable connection is reflected in the fan's assignment of emotional, functional, and symbolic meaning to the team. Internal collective meaning, a shared significance within a fan group, emerges. The internalization of values depends on integration (individuals' attempts to align with other supporters) and individuation (individuals' attempts to differentiate themselves from non-supporters) processes. (Funk & James, 2016) Fans publicly promote the team to enhance the group's image. Knowledge and preferences about players who were previously seen as faceless personas have developed. (Lock et al., 2012) Behavior becomes more frequent (Funk et al., 2011) and complex (Beaton et al., 2009). Perceived constraints to consumption still exist, but decrease with a strengthened connection (Alexandris et al., 2017). Finally, a continued relationship with the fan object at this level of psychological connection can lead to the allegiance stage.

At the attachment stage, it is all about getting personal with a smaller segment of fans. Sport organizations should make customers feel important and personalize their experiences. By offering customized experiences through technological and human interactions, managers can acknowledge the fan, making him feel special and unique. (Alexandris et al., 2022) Personalization could also enhance the fans' capabilities as resource integrators, offering more relevant services for value co-creation. Examples include invitations to exclusive events or opportunities to interact with team staff and players, fan zones, personalized information and coupons as well as preferred camera angles, instant replays, and personalized highlights during broadcasts. Affinity marketing programs can influence engaged fans by rewarding specific behaviors with benefits such as upgraded seats, free snacks, or access to hospitality and member appreciation events. Organizations can also co-brand products with numerous partners, including banks, telecommunications providers, and local businesses. They could, for example, offer fans a team-branded credit card, personalized ringtones, access to restricted websites and content, or discount cards. (Alexandris et al., 2022)

4. Allegiance Stage:

Finally, some fans might reach the allegiance stage. Here, the individual holds the strongest possible psychological connection to the fan object (e.g., “I live for the L.A. Lakers”). (Funk & James, 2016) The attitude of an allegiant fan is persistent (enduring over time), intrinsically consistent (value congruence), and resistant to change (withstanding counterinfluences, such as negative information or losses) (Funk & James, 2001; Funk &

James, 2006). It influences cognitive processing, which is reflected in loyalty, biases, and predictable behavior (Funk & James, 2016).

At the allegiance stage, it is all about getting authentic. Sport organizations should maintain relationships by building trust and leveraging allegiant fans to promote the sport product. As noted, a small segment of consumers accounts for a large share of revenue, which is why highly connected fans are crucial to success. Allegiance strategies should be consistent and communicate the core values. A sport team can build more loyal customers if it is perceived as reliable, honest, and consistent. It is also recommended to keep using “get personal” strategies from the attachment stage. While the commitment in the allegiance stage is enduring, meaning and passion fluctuate. Managers should thus make fans remember why they are passionate about the sport product, continuously rekindling that passion. Through “get authentic” strategies, organizations should aim to build long-term trust by offering opportunities to develop genuine relationships. Managers must enable customers to express their opinions and remain continuously proactive and responsive to new feedback. (Alexandris et al., 2022) In terms of S-D logic, this relates to value cocreation through service exchange. Allegiant fans have significantly more information and skills specific to consuming the fan object than merely attracted fans. By improving the experience through cooperation with them, value can be co-created without monetary exchange. Given that the fan object has become an important aspect of the fan’s daily life, teams should respect constraints from other life domains (e.g., financial, social, health) and support the fan in navigating them. Finally, allegiant fans can be important socializing agents, with an abundance of skills and knowledge they can share with fans at earlier stages. Teams should enable referral behavior and encourage it through incentives. By capitalizing on their advocacy, sport organizations cannot only increase knowledge at lower levels but also acknowledge the allegiant fan. Figure 5 summarizes the goals of the mentioned strategies by the PCM stage. (Alexandris et al., 2022)

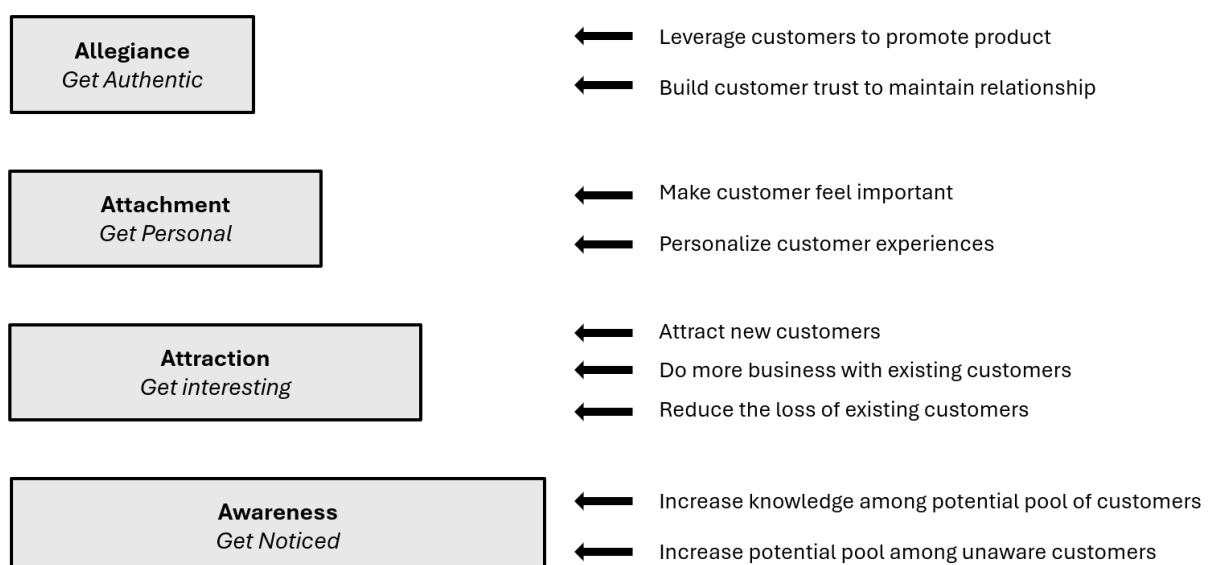


Figure 5: PCM Stage Management Strategies (based on Alexandris et al., 2022, p. 122)

2.4.2 PCM Stage Progression and Segmentation

As previously mentioned, fans can move up and down within the PCM without ever reaching higher stages. Personal, psychological, social, and contextual factors stimulate this fluctuation in connection. It occurs continuously and, to some degree, even among allegiant fans. (Alexandris et al., 2022) Tamir (2022) proposes that fandom fluctuates in cycles depending on the current life stage. Each cycle contains four important steps (see Figure 6).

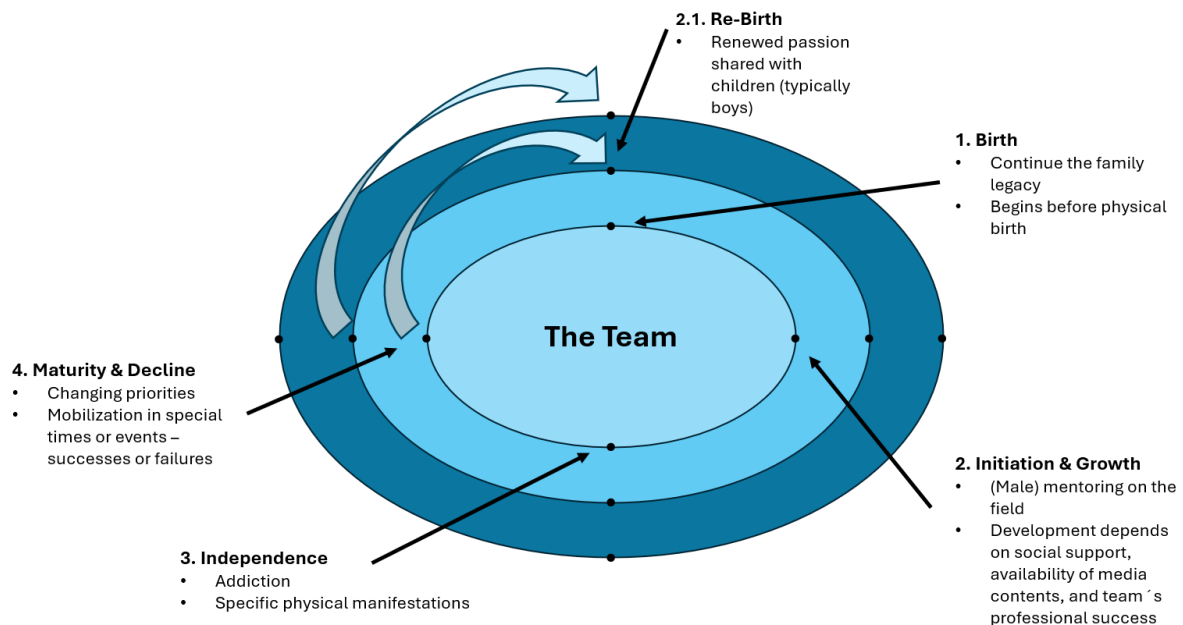


Figure 6: The Fan Lifecycle Model (based on Tamir, 2022, p. 7)

First, the child is born, often inheriting fandom from parents or other close socializing agents. Some socializing actions might even take place before birth (e.g., decorating a child's room with merchandise). In the second step, initiation occurs. Accompanied by a long-standing fan, most often the father, children attend their first games and make their first core experiences. (Tamir, 2022) In fact, despite the growing feminization of sports, masculinity is still central to many sports fans (Porat, 2010). Fathers are the most frequent socializing agents who introduce children to their favorite sport and team (Spaaij & Anderson, 2010), with some, for example, expressing concerns about their masculine image if they fail to do so (Tamir, 2019). At the same time, fewer girls are introduced to sports at an early age due to gender role expectations. Even when they are introduced later in life, it is most often through a male figure (e.g., a boyfriend or brother). (Tamir, 2022) With crumbling gender norms, however, this should and can be expected to change in the upcoming years. Sport organizations at the forefront of this social development can tap into the potential of an immense, currently underserved customer segment. During adolescence, the third stage happens. Psychological and social processes facilitate progression through the PCM stages, and fandom peaks in intensity. Young individuals begin to consume independently and internalize the fandom. Some fans describe their connection at this point as similar to an addiction. The last step is maturation of the fan and a decline in psychological connection. External pressures (e.g., career, family) take

over, and priorities change. Behaviors that felt appropriate as a young person (e.g., aggression, chanting) now feel immature. Apart from two exceptional events, either reawakening fans through enormous success or mobilizing support in times of crisis (Tamir, 2022), individuals are likely to regress in their PCM stage. This is where the cyclical nature of fandom comes in. Through birth, the parents' fandom gets rekindled. To preserve the family's identity and fulfill parental duties, they begin educating the child, drawing on their own positive and negative experiences as young fans, as well as the associated social implications. The cycle of growth and maturation restarts, with reduced but still significant involvement. With the birth of a new child or even a grandchild, the circle gets retriggered. For a grandparent, physical involvement is especially limited. Nevertheless, a continued sense of family heritage can foster bonds with the younger generation. Through his model, the author shows that fandom is intergenerational, externally influenced, and that involvement fluctuates naturally throughout the life cycle. (Tamir, 2022)

Involvement is “*generally conceptualized to present the psychological connection of an individual with an object.*” (Kunkel et al., 2013, p. 178) As illustrated by the PCM, it results in behavioral and attitudinal outcomes. It is often separated into situational and enduring involvement. The first is temporary, context-dependent, and can be used to build the latter. (Alexandris et al., 2022). To operationalize the PCM, Beaton et al., (2009) developed a method built around involvement. They recommend measuring three involvement facets as multi-item constructs on 7-point Likert scales (Beaton et al., 2011). Pleasure involvement, which refers to the hedonic value and enjoyment of the activity. Centrality involvement, which represents social interactions and the role the activity plays in someone's life. Sign involvement, which refers to the self-expression a fan seeks to convey to others. To move from awareness to attraction (hedonic motives & dispositional needs), the pleasure facet is particularly significant, whereas in later stages (internalization), the other facets become more important. (Alexandris et al., 2022) An example of a nine-item involvement scale, based on Beaton et al.'s (2011) operationalization of psychological involvement, specifically adapted for the use on sport spectators (Kunkel et al., 2013) can be seen in Table 4.

Construct	Item
Pleasure	Watching the “League/Team” is one of the most satisfying things I do.
	I really enjoy watching matches “of my Team” / “between clubs in the League”.
	I watch my favorite “League/Team” because I like it.
Sign	Watching the “League/Team” says a lot about who I am.
	You can tell a lot about a person by the “League/Team” they follow.
	When I watch the “League/Team”, I can really be myself.
Centrality	I find a lot of my life organized around following the “League/Team”.
	A lot of my time is organized around following the “League/Team”.
	Following the “League/Team” has a central role in my life.

Table 4: Items for PCM Involvement Facets (based on Kunkel et al., 2013, p. 182)

After calculating mean scores for each involvement facet, they can be classified using predetermined cut points. The authors suggest rating mean scores ≤ 4.5 as low (L), scores ranging from 4.51–5.74 as medium (M), and scores ≥ 5.75 as high (H). Through combining these ratings, involvement profiles can be constructed (e.g., Pleasure [L], Centrality [M], Sign [H]). Finally, a 5-step staging algorithm (see Table 5), based on a prior theoretical distribution of the 27 unique involvement profiles (see Table 6), is applied to sort individuals into a PCM stage. (Beaton et al., 2009)

Using the involvement profile ratings, complete the actions below IN ORDER until stage is determined	
Action 1	If Pleasure facet is rated low (L), Stage = Awareness (non-participants), Attachment (participants);
If condition is not satisfied, then	
Action 2	If Both Centrality and Sign facets are rated low (L), Stage = Attraction;
If condition is not satisfied, then	
Action 3	If Either Centrality or Sign facets are rated low (L) Stage = Attachment;
If condition is not satisfied, then	
Action 4	If Any Two facets are rated as high (H) Stage = Allegiance;
If condition is not satisfied, then	
Action 5	All remaining Stage = Attachment

Table 5: Staging algorithm for PCM (based on Beaton et al., 2009, p. 188)

Awareness			Attraction			Attachment			Allegiance		
P*	C	S	P	C	S	P	C	S	P	C	S
L ^a	L	L	M	L	L	L	L	M	M	H	H
			H	L	L	L	L	H	H	H	M
						L	M	L	H	M	H
						L	M	M	H	H	H
						L	M	H			
						L	H	L			
						L	H	M			
						L	H	H			
						M	L	M			
						M	L	H			
						M	M	L			
						M	H	L			
						M	M	M			
						M	M	H			
						M	H	M			
						H	L	M			
						H	M	L			
						H	M	M			
						H	L	H			
						H	H	L			

*: P = Pleasure Facet; C = Centrality Facet; S = Sign Facet
a: may be Awareness if a non-participant, or Attachment if a participant

Table 6: Theoretical Distribution of Involvement Profiles across PCM stages (based on Beaton et al., 2009, p. 189)

Since its development in 2009, the method has been used to examine spectators and participants in sports across numerous countries, thereby enhancing the ecological validity of the framework. Industry professionals primarily apply the PCM to develop consumer profiles, monitor stage transitions, and calculate conversion rates alongside marketing costs. However, although the operationalization was supported by substantial empirical evidence, research also revealed limitations. Some studies, for example, happened to miss-classify 10% to 20% of the participants. (Funk & James, 2016) This could be ascribed to the fact that the originators of the method themselves described the process as “more closely related to intuition, trial and error than to any supportable quantitative method”. (Beaton et al., 2009, p. 186) The fixed cut-points are, for example, solely based on personal reasoning without empirical data (Baker et al., 2020). Baker et al., (2020) propose using Bayesian Latent Profile Analysis instead of the conventional algorithm, yielding more distinct segments and greater predictive validity. However, other concerns remain. In particular, the contextual nuances that influence the psychological connection remain underexamined (Funk & James, 2016). This leads to the authors specifically calling for advancements to the PCM, *“driven by a service experience design approach in which the consumer experience is considered a journey through which many interactions occur between an individual and a sport organization, and this interaction is a management function”* (Funk & James, 2016, p. 14), which fit right into the overarching goal of this thesis. After diving deeper into the underlying mechanisms that facilitate PCM stage progression, it will contribute to these advancements by integrating SCB findings with recent customer experience literature.

2.4 Motivation

Possibly the most important factor driving increased sport involvement is motivation, which positively affects all three facets of involvement used in the PCM staging process. It stands for an individual's desire to achieve goals and satisfy needs. (Alexandris et al., 2022) There are many attempts to explain motivation. Based on Maslow's well-known hierarchy of needs, sports consumption can fulfill the needs for love, belonging, esteem, and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). A more nuanced account of motivation is offered by Ryan & Deci (2000), who introduced self-determination theory (SDT), which is widely applied in sport contexts. SDT views individuals as self-governing organisms with three central psychological needs (competence, relatedness, and autonomy), all of which can be influenced by fandom (Standage, 2023). The need for competence (the ability to express, expand, or exercise capabilities) is relatively easy to satisfy through fandom, as information is widely distributed, easily understood, and often socially relevant. Through sociological influences, which will be introduced in Chapter 2.6, it can also contribute to a sense of relatedness (belonging to a community and connections with others). The need for autonomy is more complex to explain and relates to intrinsically motivated behavior. Self-governed organisms that navigate environmental contingencies require some autonomy to exercise their agency. Individuals determine the extent to which their behavior is autonomous depending on causality orientations and functional significance. (Funk et al., 2012) Causality orientations theory is concerned with the perceived locus of causality, referring to the causal origins of behavior. If the locus of control is perceived

within the individual, behavior is considered intrinsically motivated and contributes to a sense of autonomy. Conversely, if the causal origins of behavior are perceived as external, the behavior is said to be externally motivated, thereby thwarting autonomy. (Decarms, 1972) Functional significance refers to the psychological meaning individuals assign to an environmental influence (Deci, 1976). When individuals attribute high significance to external contingencies in controlling current behavior, an external locus of causality is more likely to develop. Therefore, SDT proposes that motivation can either be categorized as intrinsic (autonomy-oriented) or as extrinsic (control-oriented). (Funk et al., 2012) By adding the state of amotivation (a lack of motivation) and four subcategories of extrinsic motivation, Ryan & Deci (2000) developed a continuum model depending on the internalization of the perceived locus of causality (see Figure 7).

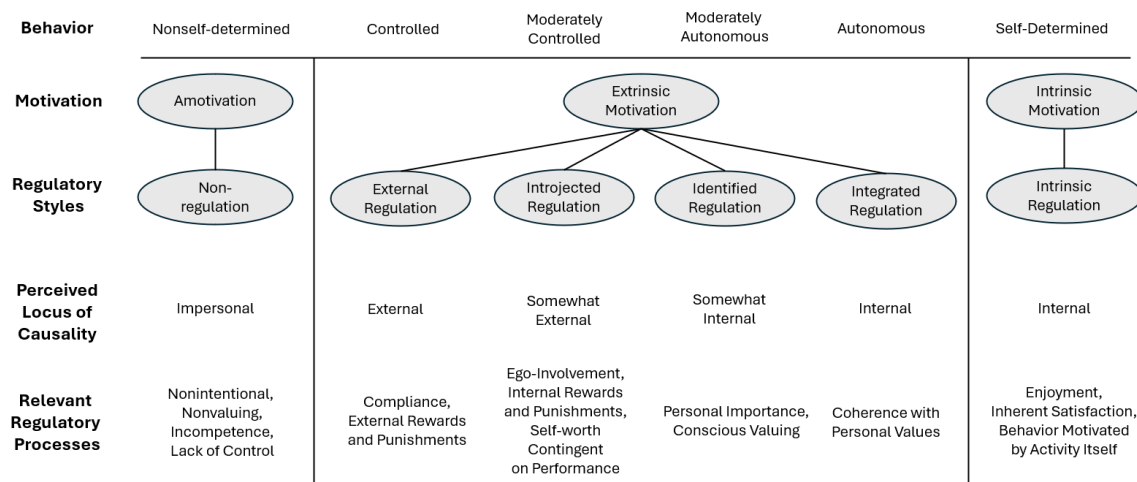


Figure 7: The Self-Determination Continuum (based on Gagné & Deci, 2005, p. 336; Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 72)

On one side is self-determined behavior. It is fully autonomous, intrinsically regulated, and stems from pure enjoyment of the task. On the other side, there is non-regulated behavior. A consumer with this type of motivation either does not interact with the fan object or is forced to do so. Between them are extrinsically motivated behaviors, which comprise four subcategories. In its purest form, behavior is completely externally regulated. An example might be a reseller attending a game to receive a limited-time merchandise item. A weakened version is introjected regulation. Here, the causal origins of behavior are still perceived as external; however, the activity begins to fulfill internal needs. An example is a fan attending a game and bragging about it on social media to fulfill ego needs. With identified regulation, the perceived locus of causality shifts to an internal one and becomes personally important. A fan might support a local team because the community identity is important to them, or because it is a family tradition. Lastly, in integrated regulated behavior, external motivation is fully internalized, and behavior gets regulated by value congruence. A vivid example are allegiant fans, who unsatisfyingly support their team throughout a crisis, because it is such an integral part of their identity. Although the perceived locus of causality is internal, the behavior cannot be considered intrinsically motivated, as it is not undertaken for the pure enjoyment of the activity. (Ryan & Deci 2000)

As illustrated by the PCM, highly connected fans internalize the values of the fan object, and behavior becomes intrinsically motivated. The fact that, during identified regulation, personal importance and, during integrated regulation, value congruence are relevant regulatory processes, overlaps with findings from the attachment and allegiance stage. (Funk & James, 2016) Thus, sport organizations should manage their strategies accordingly, moving from extrinsic to more intrinsic incentives for deeply connected individuals. Adequate incentives are especially important given their undermining effect. Highly salient external incentives can lead to a perceived external locus of control, even if the behavior was originally intrinsically motivated (Moller & Sheldon, 2020). It may help sport organizations to view themselves as enabling rather than controlling fan behavior, particularly among consumers at higher PCM stages. For example, distributing shirts to every fan during a playoff game might be perceived as a tangible external reward by a weakly connected fan who has not yet owned merchandise. For an allegiant fan, however, the shirt may not have special extrinsic value. Instead, it might enable internal processes, for example, strong feelings of relatedness when seeing the entire arena dressed in the same playoff shirt.

Reduced intrinsic motivation and amotivation can stem from intrapersonal constraints (e.g., psychological barriers, alternatives to participation, cultural factors, negative past experiences, lack of time). Extrinsic motivation is influenced by intra- and interpersonal factors (e.g., lack of knowledge, lack of partners), as well as structural factors (e.g., accessibility problems, financial constraints, issues with the sport product). (Alexandris et al., 2022) The intensity of perceived constraints drops significantly throughout the PCM stages (Alexandris et al., 2017). Therefore, reducing structural and interpersonal constraints seems especially important for managing fans at lower PCM stages. Constraints, however, are only one sub-factor influencing motivation. Personal investment theory proposes that motivation is influenced by beliefs about the self, personal goals, and perceived options and alternatives (see Figure 8). (Alexandris et al., 2022)

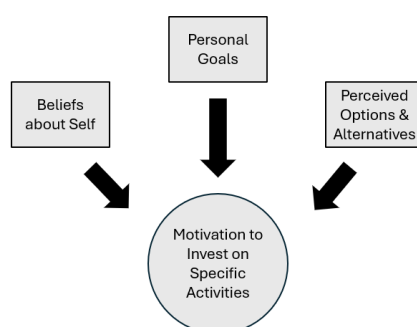


Figure 8: Personal Investment Theory (based on Alexandris et al., 2022, p. 142)

The perceived constraints mentioned above, alongside personal values and the sociocultural environment, influence perceptions of which opportunities for engagement are available. Feelings related to one's identity depend on personal competence. Personal goals are defined as the expected outcomes when engaging in a fan activity (see Table 7). (Alexandris et al., 2022)

<i>Factors that influence an individual's motivation to invest their time and effort in a specific sport behavior</i>	<i>Definitions and Examples</i>
1. Beliefs about Self influenced by:	<i>Defined as:</i> Feelings related to who one is
• Personal Competence	Ability to perform a sport behavior effectively
• Identity	How an individual perceives themselves in association with certain sport groups
2. Perceived Options and Alternatives influenced by:	<i>Defined as:</i> Perceptions of what leisure opportunities/ opportunities for sport consumption are available
• Personal Values	Beliefs or ideals shared by members of a culture
• Socio-cultural Environment	Social and cultural groups who influence perception about sport choices
• Perceived Constraints	Factors that limit engagement in a behavior
3. Personal Goals	<i>Defined as:</i> The outcomes that individuals expect when engaging in sports (e.g., fun and enjoyment)

Table 7: Personal Investment Theory - Definitions and Examples (based on Alexandris et al., 2022, p. 145)

The theory implies that individuals' perceptions of the environment, even though universal psychological needs exist, greatly influence their conscious thoughts (Funk et al., 2012). This results in motives, "*conscious reasons for an individual deciding to act in one way or another.*" (Funk et al., 2012, p. 357) Funk et al., (2009) managed to establish five general motives that drive sport spectatorship (socialization, performance, excitement, esteem, and diversion). They are called SPEED motives and are measured by two items each (see Table 8).

Motive	Description
<i>Socialization</i>	Represents a desire for social interaction. Individuals are motivated to seek a sport event experience due to opportunities for the enhancement of human relationships through external interaction with other spectators, participants, friends and family.
	Items: • The opportunity to interact with other people • The chance to socialize with others
<i>Performance</i>	Represents a desire for aesthetic and physical pleasure. Individuals are motivated to seek a sport experience due to opportunities to enjoy the grace, skill, and artistry of athletic movement and physiological movement.
	Items: • The gracefulness associated with the game • The natural elegance of the game
<i>Excitement</i>	Represents a desire for intellectual stimulation. Individuals are motivated to seek a sport event experience due to opportunities for mental action and exploration from the atmospheric conditions created by the uncertainty of participation and competition and the spectacle of associated activities.
	Items: • I enjoy the excitement associated with the games • I find the games very exciting
<i>Esteem</i>	Represents a desire for competency. Individuals are motivated to seek a sport event experience due to opportunities for achievement and challenge that produce a sense of mastery and heighten a sense of personal and collective self-esteem.
	Items: • I get a sense of accomplishment when the team wins • I feel like I have won when the team wins
<i>Diversion</i>	Represents a desire for mental well-being. Individuals are motivated to seek a sport event experience due to opportunities to escape and remove themselves from daily work and life routines that create stress.
	Items: • It provides me with a break from my daily routine • I can get away from the tension in my life

Table 8: SPEED Motives (based on Alexandris et al., 2022, p. 147)

Considering the PCM, it seems that socialization and diversion motives might be more prominent in the early stages. In fact, a follow-up paper by Funk et al., (2012) shows that control-oriented behavior, which is probably more common among weakly connected fans, correlates with diversion and socialization motives. Fans who have these motives seek stress relief and social connection. Fandom built around such desires is focused on external outcomes and easily substitutable by other leisure activities, leading to numerous consumption alternatives. Cross promotions with other leisure providers could prove beneficial, since it combines multiple consumption options into one activity (e.g., NFL x Nickelodeon collaboration (Clark, 2021)). In turn, autonomy-oriented behavior correlates with performance, excitement, and esteem motives. These motives depend on the nature of sports and are not readily substitutable for other activities. (Funk et al., 2012) Thus, during customer binding efforts, sport organizations should consider communicating how their sport product can help fulfill these motives.

2.5 Attitude Formation

Attitude formation is another important psychological process that influences decision-making. Attitudes represent general thoughts and favorable feelings towards an attitude object and can predict intentions and behavior. Based on their associated attitudes, consumers evaluate whether a sports product can satisfy a need, respectively a motive. They can be shaped by personal experience, the media, marketing, and the social environment, and are often conceptualized as multidimensional constructs. (Alexandris et al., 2022) According to the tri-component model, an attitude object (e.g., L.A. Lakers) can elicit three types of responses. Cognitive (thoughts and beliefs), affective (feelings & emotions), and behavioral (actions/observable behavior) (Kaiser & Wilson, 2019). The order in which these think, feel, or act responses are triggered depends on an individual's involvement. Researchers conceptualized the hierarchy of effects theory, categorizing the attitude formation in three distinct processes (see Figure 9) (Solomon, 2020).

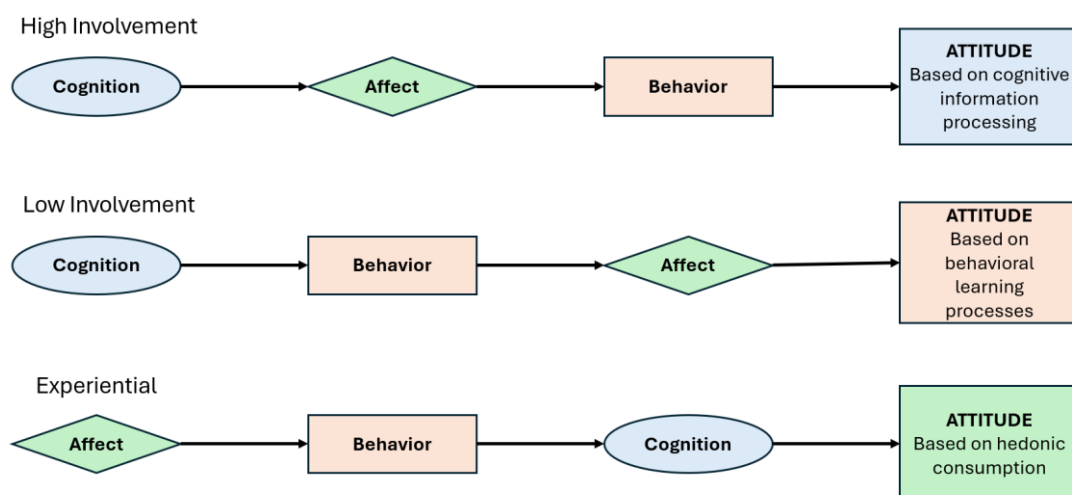


Figure 9: Three Hierarchies of Effects (based on Solomon, 2020, p. 293)

The high-involvement hierarchy assumes that individuals enter an elaborate DM process. An example could be a fan who compares different season ticket packages (NBA, 2026b) and their benefits. First, a cognitive process is entered, and information is gathered.

Through evaluation, affect for a particular option builds, and the fan ultimately engages in relevant purchasing behavior. In low-involvement processes, customers do not care enough about the decision to engage in a full DM process. Therefore, they act on the basis of limited knowledge and only form an affective response afterwards. An example might be fans wanting to buy food from concession stands during the game. They often do not care enough about the decision to walk around the entire stadium and compare every option. More likely, they will recognize the next best option, perform the relevant behavior (purchase & consume), and subsequently form an affective response. Lastly, attitudes can form through experiential processes, based on emotional reactions. A fan comes into a packed arena and immediately feels the emotions rising. The electric atmosphere stimulates heightened emotions, leading to fan behavior (e.g., chanting, celebrating). Only after the game will the individual evaluate the expressed behavior and felt emotions. (Solomon, 2020)

A popular model on how marketing messages can influence lasting attitude formation was developed by Petty & Cacioppo (1986) and builds on the hierarchy of effects. It is called the elaboration likelihood model of persuasion (ELM) and proposes that consumers process a persuasive message about an attitude object either on a central or a peripheral route (see Figure 10). Which one is taken depends on motivation and the current ability to process that information. The central route entails high cognitive involvement and can result in a lasting attitude formation through thoughtful information processing. On the peripheral route, little elaboration occurs, consumers are more responsive to sensory cues than to actual information, and attitude formation is unstable.

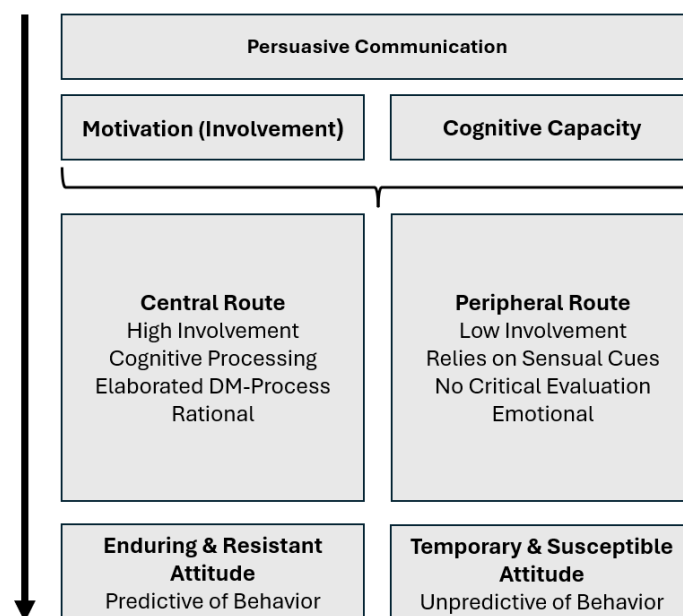


Figure 10: Simplified Depiction of the ELM (based on Petty & Cacioppo, 1986, p. 126; Inspired by Auer-Zotlöterer's consumer behavior course at the University of Vienna)

The prominent notion of involvement in both the ELM and the PCM facilitates integration of the two theories. Fans in the allegiance stage should be more likely to use the central route of processing, while fans in the attraction stage should be more likely to process information peripherally. (Pokrywczynski, 2018) The establishment of a lasting attitude

through central route processing is consistent with findings of higher attitudinal engagement at higher PCM stages. Finally, to understand how attitudes actually influence behavior, the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) is widely used in sports management. It states that attitudes, along with subjective norms and perceived control over a given behavior, influence the intention to engage in it, which, in turn, leads to the actual behavior.

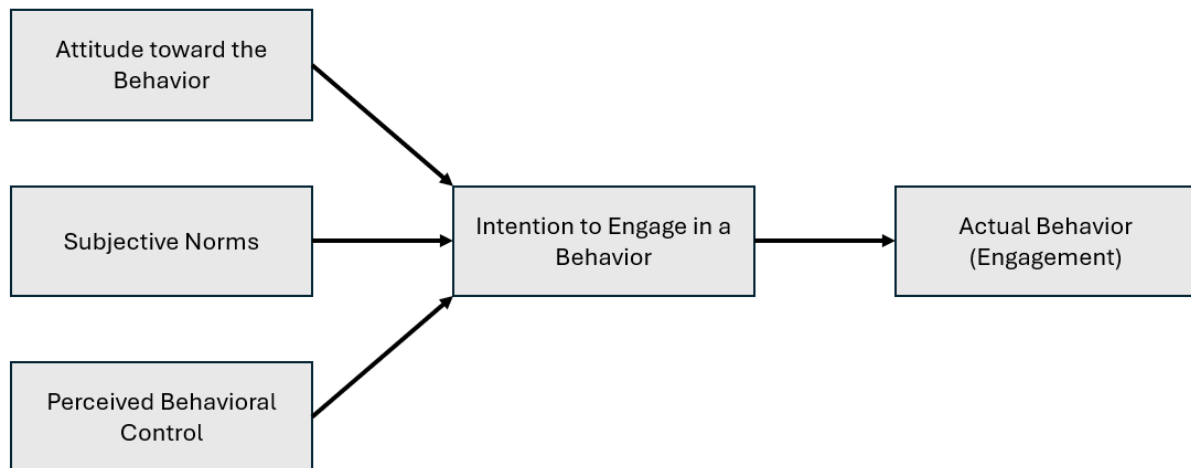


Figure 11: The Theory of Planned Behavior (based on Ajzen, 1991, p. 182)

2.6 Identification Theories

Team identification studies explore how a fan's identity, the way that individuals view themselves, can provide a psychological connection to the team and thereby highlight the social aspect of fandom (Branscombe & Wann, 1991). Research has shown that team identification has numerous implications and may be the most important factor in sustained fandom. High identification is associated with greater involvement (Alexandris et al., 2022) and crucial for PCM progression (Lock et al., 2012), which ultimately depends on personal meaning and value congruence (Funk & James, 2016). According to the personal investment theory (see Table 7), identity is a crucial factor in influencing motivation. Furthermore, high team identification is linked to positive effects on emotions (Prayag et al., 2020), social connections & well-being (Wann et al., 2011), game attendance & merchandise purchase intentions (Kwon et al., 2022) and can help to explain why individuals become or stay fans regardless of team success (Lock et al., 2014; Rhee et al., 2016). Through cognitive, discursive, physical, and behavioral activities, individuals continuously engage in a process called identity work (Caza et al., 2018), defined as *“forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, revising or rejecting collective, role and personal self-meanings”* (Caza et al., 2018, p. 7). This definition implies that individuals combine different types of identities in identity work (e.g., personal identity and group/collective identity). In fact, research shows that, although some agency exists in shaping identity (Chun & Sagas, 2022), it is often constrained by social context (Brown & Toyoki, 2013; Costas & Kärreman, 2016) and interpersonally negotiated (Lucas, 2011).

Most research on team identification has treated fan identity solely as collective identity (Chun & Sagas, 2022), as the concept originated from social identity theory (SIT)

(Alexandris et al., 2022). It aims to explain how self-esteem and identity are derived from social group membership (Koo et al., 2025), depending on the emotional significance and values ascribed to that membership (Chun & Sagas, 2022). Upon self-categorizing as group members, fans evaluate the ingroup's status relative to outgroups with similar interests. This intergroup comparison motivates efforts to maintain status and to distinguish the in- from out-groups and is seen as the main mechanism through which groups derive meaning and value (Spears, 2011). Lock & Funk (2016) suggest that ingroups for sport organizations exist on three levels, varying in exclusiveness and opportunities for interpersonal relationships. The most inclusive is the superordinate group identity, for example, all fans that identify with a team. It often provides fewer opportunities for strong interpersonal connections due to its size. More exclusive is subgroup identity, comprising a smaller subset of members of the superordinate group. This could, for example, be hardcore fans who always sit in a specific fan section. Relational group identity also exists outside of the sport context (e.g., family, friends). It is the most exclusive but also offers the most potential for interpersonal connection. The notion that the potential for stronger relationships increases with decreasing group size implies that sport organizations could seek to manage fans into subgroups to reap the benefits of stronger group identification and reduced perceived interpersonal constraints. By applying S-D logic, these fan groups can be viewed as nested and interlocking service ecosystems that enable resource integration and value cocreation (Vargo & Lusch, 2017). SIT can help to account for many phenomena like intergroup conflict through prejudice, stereotyping & discrimination (Chun & Sagas, 2022), preferential treatment of ingroup members & social cohesion (Koo et al., 2025), as well as BIRGing and CORfing behaviors (Cialdini et al., 1976), in which individuals publicly associate themselves with successful teams or take distance from underperforming ones.

However, the focus of collective identity on the subordination of personal to group identity is severely limited, as it neglects intragroup differences at the individual level. (Koo et al., 2025) Individuals, for example, often struggle balancing assimilation into a group with their desire for differentiation, leading to feelings of being too unique or not unique enough (Brewer, 1991). Therefore, Chun & Sagas (2022) developed the concept of integrated fan identity (see Figure 12). They propose that a fan's identity depends on three interacting identity types. Alongside the newly introduced collective identity, the authors introduce role (RI) and personal identity (PI). Their interactions are non-linear, and each type constantly shifts in the extent to which it contributes to the overall process of identity work.

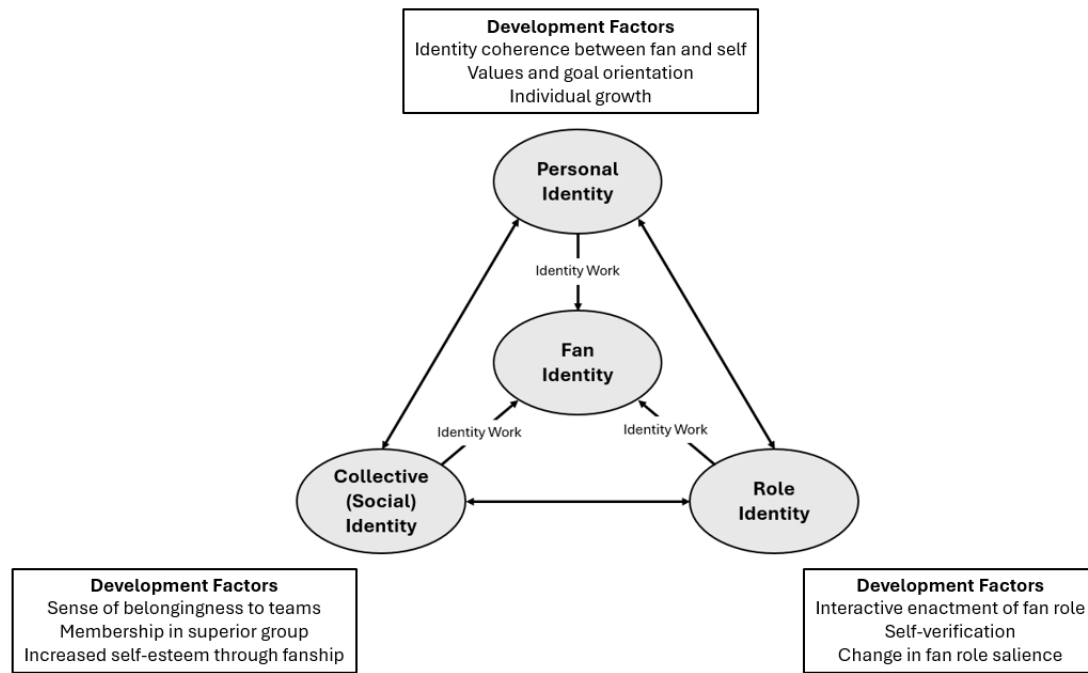


Figure 12: The Concept of Integrated Fan Identity (based on Chun & Sagas, 2022, p. 52)

Role identity is concerned with the different socially constructed roles that individuals take on. Each role entails different norms and expectations that guide behavior (e.g., parent, fan). Fans may behave in a certain manner because it is perceived as central to the role. (Koo et al., 2025) It is assumed that the internal meaning a role takes on primarily depends on interpersonal interactions. Fan identity is strengthened when others verify fans in their role. However, individuals often assume multiple roles that may conflict (e.g., fan and parent). (Chun & Sagas, 2022) Depending on role salience, its placement in an unconscious role hierarchy, and the cost an individual incurs for not enacting a role, certain roles will be chosen over others. Voluntary ones, such as being a sport fan, often take a back seat when they conflict with more crucial ones (e.g., being a parent). (Horton et al., 2014) Personal identity views the individual as a unique entity, rather than merely a role enactor or group member. (Chun & Sagas, 2022) Meanings derived from it grow internally and serve as identity standards. It can be viewed as a stable “master identity” that influences the meanings attributed to role and social identities. (Burke, 2004) Changes in personal identity often follow an identity crisis (Chun & Sagas, 2022), prompting individuals to reconsider alternatives by exploring different roles and options, depending on their level of commitment. (Kroger & Marcia, 2011)

Recently, Koo et al. (2025) also criticized the depersonalization limitations of SIT and its focus on cognitive processes, which fail to address deep emotional connections among fans. The authors suggest using identity fusion theory (IFT) as a remedy, which combines cognitive and emotional dimensions. (Koo et al., 2025). In contrast to SIT, and consistent with the concept of integrated fan identity, IFT proposes the merging of social and personal identities rather than the subsumption of the latter. The theory emphasizes the coexistence and even simultaneous activation of both within fused individuals. It focuses on personal agency, with fused members perceiving their actions as vital to the group’s

overall welfare. (Koo et al., 2025) This allows fans to experience pro-group behavior not as an identity loss, but as personal agency channeled towards group goals. It introduces collective (shared values & goals across the group) and relational ties (close interpersonal connections within the group). (Swann et al., 2012) Collective ties, often formed by the team's symbolic and cultural significance, provide shared values and a collective identity. Cognitive elaboration, chants, and rituals reinforce them. Relational ties, formed through repeated interactions, provide the emotional depth necessary for personal identification, as evidenced by intense friendships among fans. This highlights the need for sports organizations to foster social relationships, not merely shared commitment. As the connection with the team deepens, social and personal identities blur. (Koo et al., 2025) This goes with PCM findings, which indicate value congruence at the allegiance stage (Funk & James, 2016). While SIT excels at explaining behavior driven by conformity and cognitive reasoning, IFT can explain behaviors that transcend normative expectations. The authors acknowledge that both theories can coexist in some situations. During important occasions (e.g., World Cups), fans who experience strong group identification are likely to adhere to norms (e.g., watching the national team on TV). Fused fans, perceiving their actions as vital to the group, might engage in extraordinary behavior, such as acts of self-sacrifice (e.g., taking on debt to travel abroad to support the national team).

This subchapter suggests that managing social factors and role expectations with respect to personal aspects is crucial for attracting and retaining fans. Overall, the section on SCB has shown that sports consumption is a complex phenomenon, continuously influenced by interacting personal, psychological, social, and contextual factors. Through interventions, sports organizations should aim to foster a psychological connection and enhance the overall experience.

3. The Sports Consumer Experience

As previously mentioned, SCB is derived from general consumer behavior literature (Funk, 2017). Therefore, this chapter will primarily draw on general insights into customer experience (CX) and enrich them with findings from sports research.

3.1 Customer Experience

The CX comprises all direct and indirect interactions between a firm and a customer (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). These interactions happen at distinct touchpoints, also called encounters (Yoshida, 2017), on a myriad of on- and offline channels and lead to holistic and multidimensional responses (cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensorial, and social) (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). In recent years, enhancing CX has become a central management objective (Accenture, 2015). However, the shift in focus on experience can be traced back to earlier roots. More specifically, research on this topic was encouraged by Abbot, who stated in 1955, “*what people really desire are not products but satisfying experiences.*” (Abbott, 1955, p. 40) This notion aligns well with S-D logic’s suggestion that goods function as a distribution mechanism for value rather than as the primary locus (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). CX development in marketing can be divided into seven time periods (see Table 9) and combines different marketing disciplines.

Time Frame	Topic Area	Contributions
1960s	Process Models; Customer Buying Behavior	• CX and DM as a process • Path-to-Purchase models
1970s	Customer Satisfaction & Loyalty	• Evaluating customer perceptions and attitudes about the experience • Making CX measurable
1980s	Service Marketing	• Contextual factors • Measuring service quality • First attempt at journey mapping through service blueprinting
1990s	Relationship Marketing	• Long-term relationship building • Trust & commitment
2000s	Customer Relationship Marketing	• Optimizing customer lifetime value • Building appropriate rather than long-term relationships
2000s	Customer-Centric Marketing	• Taking on the customer’s perspective • Enabled by individual-level data
2010s	Customer Engagement	• Attitudes & behaviors that go beyond purchasing decisions • Recognized value of nonpurchase interactions • Recognizing the customer’s role in the experience

Table 9: Historical Perspective on Customer Experience in Marketing (based on Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, pp. 71 – 75)

In the 1960s, researchers began to view CX and DM as processes that customers go through (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Process models on advertising effects, such as the still

prominent AIDA (attention-interest-desire-action) model and other adaptations, were developed (Lavidge & Steiner, 1961), trying to model the path to purchase (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Building on earlier models, Neslin et al. (2006) propose a process across multiple channels, ranging from initial problem recognition to after-sales experiences. Viewing the DM as a multistage and multichannel process ultimately led to the concept of the customer purchase journey (CJ) (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Lemon & Verhoef (2016, p. 71) define this journey as *“the process a customer goes through, across all stages and touchpoints, that makes up the customer experience.”* To understand CX throughout this journey, it must be measurable, which led to the examination of customer satisfaction during the 1970s. It is most often conceptualized as the result of comparing expectations with actual delivered performance and is linked to behavioral outcomes such as loyalty. In the 1980s, service marketing emerged as a distinct marketing discipline, grounded in the view that services have unique properties, which require different marketing approaches. (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) It should be mentioned that although service marketing played a central role in the development of S-D logic, the notions of services derived from this marketing domain and service in S-D logic differ. In S-D logic, service is defined as knowledge & skills and is the fundamental basis of exchange. Services in service marketing is an umbrella term for all intangible outputs distinct from tangible goods. (Vargo & Lusch, 2004) An important concept developed in service marketing is service quality. Most prominently, the SERVQUAL model by Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry (1988), validated in numerous contexts, introduced a scale to assess perceived service quality across five dimensions. It is concerned with the expectation-performance gap, and suggests that tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy are central factors for a satisfying service delivery. Clemes et al., (2011) have noticed limitations when applied to a professional sport context and identified three quality dimensions specifically related to professional sport spectatorship. They propose a hierarchical process in which perceived service quality is influenced by the outcome, the physical environment, and the interaction quality, each comprising sub-dimensions. Interaction quality is influenced by security employee performance, food & beverage service, and player interactions. Physical environment quality depends on seating, visuals & sound, stadium access, cleanliness & design, and finally, outcome quality gets influenced by the atmosphere and game quality. Additionally, all primary dimensions are influenced by the fans' involvement and the social environment. (Clemes et al., 2011) During this early period of service marketing, environmental influences on CX, as well as the importance of critical incidents in service delivery, were recognized, and service blueprinting was developed. This first attempt at customer journey mapping will be detailed in the following subchapter. During the 90 ´s, firms began to focus on developing and maintaining strong customer relationships. Initially, in B2B contexts and subsequently in consumer markets, relationship marketing emerged. This field focuses on long-term relationship building and examines constructs such as commitment, trust, switching costs, relationship quality, passion, and intimacy. Together with service marketing insights, it extends the concept of CX to include associated emotions and perceptions, as well as contextual factors. At the turn of the millennium, the emergence of customer relationship management (CRM) shifted the focus from building strong long-

term connections to extracting the most value from the relationship by optimizing customer lifetime value. CRM strategies are sometimes criticized for insufficient focus on delivering value to their customers. However, they can still advance the concept of CX by examining how different touchpoints and strategies interact and relate to business outcomes. Around the same time, customer-centric marketing emerged, focusing on delivering value to individuals rather than to mass markets. The increased availability of individual-level customer data enabled this development. (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) By taking into account circumstantial influences, research began to adopt a truly customer-centric perspective. (Funk, 2017) Customer-centric marketing aligns with S-D logic's view that value determination is phenomenological and unique to the individual, and sets the stage for future advances in CX. In the 2010s, research began to focus on customer and brand engagement, including attitudes and behaviors, moving beyond the notion that customer value stems solely from purchases. (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) Engagement, for example, not only influences purchasing but also referral, influencer, and knowledge behavior (Kumar et al., 2010). The shift in focus enables viewing nonpurchase interactions and customers themselves as essential components of the value cocreation process, thereby aligning well with S-D logic (Funk, 2017).

The developmental perspective clearly shows the holistic nature of CX. Service quality has been proposed as an antecedent shaping customer experience, yielding outcomes such as trust, satisfaction, commitment, and engagement that extend beyond purchasing behavior. Given their distinct consumption characteristics, some studies have focused specifically on sport consumers. Funk (2017) proposes, in his sport experience design framework, that the sport user and organization interact within a constructed physical or virtual sport context (see Figure 13). The organization seeks to develop, market, and deliver a product and must secure the necessary resources (e.g., capital, knowledge) to do so. Sport users, shaped by different psychological processes, want to satisfy their needs, wants, and expectations. Purchase and usage behavior within a human- and technology-designed context is enabled and managed by the sport organization, but also cocreated by the consumer and shaped by experiences not directly controlled by the organization. (Funk, 2017) Some examples of important context factors are accessibility, usefulness, social surroundings, task definition, and temporal pressure (Alexandris et al., 2022).

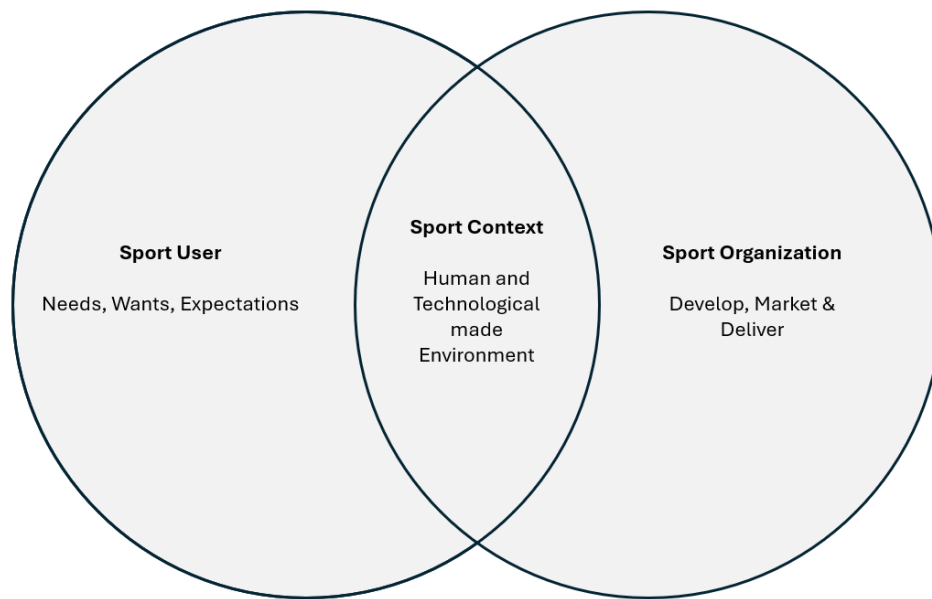


Figure 13: The Sport Experience Design Framework (based on Alexandris et al., 2022, p. 9)

Going beyond the limited concept of service quality, Yoshida (2017) suggest that consumer experience quality in sports gets shaped by four types of encounters. The sport encounter comprises all interactions with the sport itself. Quality, for example, is determined by player performance or team characteristics. The social encounters consist of fan-to-fan interactions, which can result in identity work. Quality is assessed based on relational and collective ties. Service encounters are all interactions with employees and self-service technologies. Perceived quality depends on ancillary services, such as facility design or entertainment activities. Lastly, the communication encounter entails consumer-organization interactions aimed at building an enduring relationship. Quality perceptions can depend on preferential treatment or direct communication efforts. Sport organizations compensate for the variability and unpredictability of sport and social encounters (core product) by enhancing service, and communication touchpoints (product extensions). The resulting behavioral and attitudinal consequences are proposed to be mediated by the psychological connection to the sport product. (Yoshida, 2017)

3.2 The Customer Purchase Journey

Research shows that, when designing the fan experience, managers should seek to build special connections through continuous engagement, recognizing that there is no one-size-fits-all solution. (Alexandris et al., 2022) This sums up in Lemon & Verhoef's (2016) description of CX as "*cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensorial, and social responses to a firm's offerings during the customer's entire purchase journey.*" (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 71), also called the customer decision journey. Accordingly, the customer purchase/decision journey (CJ) is defined as "*the process a customer goes through, across all stages and touchpoints*" (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 71). This DM process can be divided into pre-purchase (need recognition, consideration, search), purchase (choice, ordering, payment), and post-purchase (usage, consumption, engagement,

service requests) stages (see also Chapter 2.3) and is iterative and dynamic (see Figure 14). (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016)

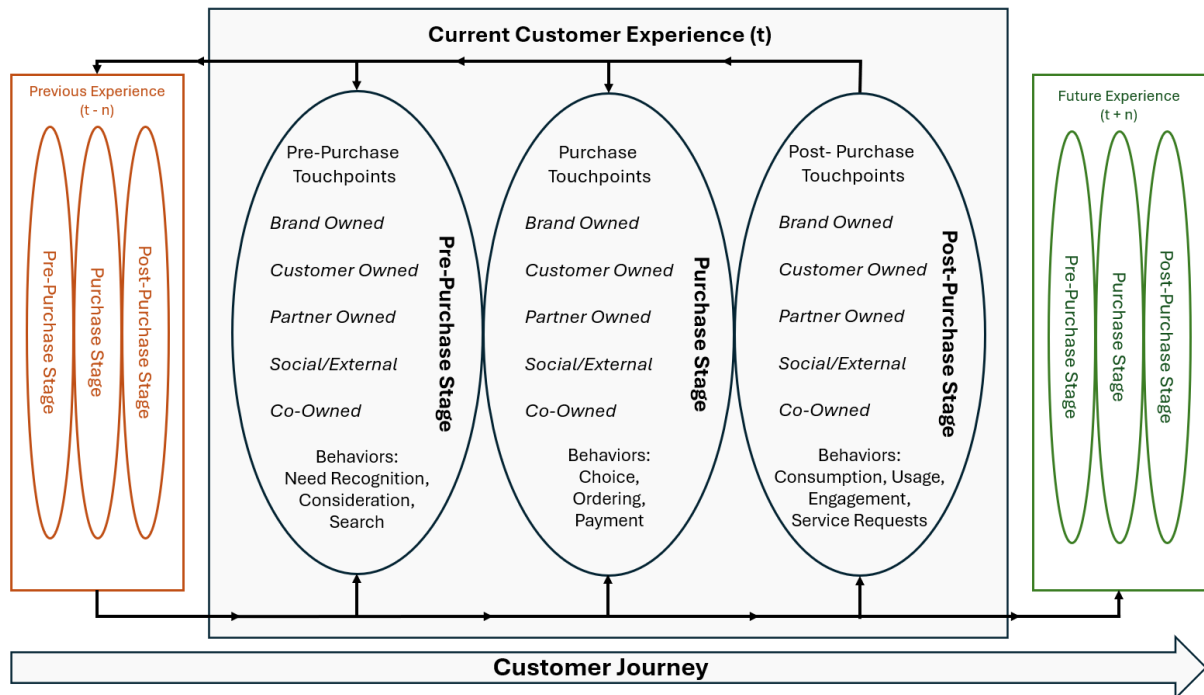


Figure 14: Process Model for Customer Journey & Experience (based on Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 77; Notion of co-owned touchpoints is based on own theorizing)

Past experiences (e.g., previous purchases) and external factors influence future DM processes (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), resulting in different attributions of each touchpoint to overall CX in repeat consumption (Koch et al., 2023). Touchpoints can be encountered directly & indirectly and come in the form of service, communication, and usage encounters. In a sports context, the latter can be further subdivided into sports and social encounters, thereby underscoring the social nature of sports consumption. (Yoshida, 2017) These interactions can be controlled by the brand (e.g., own app or website), partners (jointly designed & managed, e.g., game broadcast through broadcasting partners), customers (e.g., WoM or fan clubs), or be social/external (e.g., social media) (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). It could be argued that some touchpoints are co-owned. In some cases, brand- or customer-owned touchpoints are encountered through partner or social channels. In theory, an official team account can make its own content decisions when posting on social media platforms, which would make the post brand owned. In reality, however, social media managers must heavily adapt the content to the demands of the respective medium and socially constructed trends. In fact, a study by Hödl & Myrach (2023) shows that social media creators must optimize their content for the algorithm, thereby sacrificing authenticity. Consistent uploading schedules are rewarded, and data-driven content decisions, based on performance metrics and incentive structures, restrain creative expression. (Hödl & Myrach, 2023) At the same time, a social media post can also not fully be classified as social or partner/owned. The platform can indirectly cocreate the touchpoint through its demands, and social influences can take the form of viral trends, but ultimately neither exerts direct control over timing, design, or subsequent content management. This gives rise to the notion of

co-owned touchpoints (e.g., an optimized social media post based on a viral trend) and aligns with S-D logic's idea that value is always co-created. Through cooperation, these can become partner-owned touchpoints, possibly enhancing the value for both parties.

Different ownerships of touchpoints imply that for complex offerings, such as the sport product, encounters often happen on a myriad of on- and offline channels managed either by the brand or third parties (may even be a competitor's channel) (Wolf & Steul-Fischer, 2023). They should be coordinated by an omnichannel management perspective, integrating channels to create a seamless, enhanced CX (Valentini et al., 2020). This notion of seamlessness is further advanced by the recently introduced concept of a phygital customer journey. It aims to enhance CX by integrating the physical and digital environments, for example, through hybrid artifacts (e.g., Nike Connect jersey) and blended environments (e.g., augmented reality). (Mele et al., 2024) Which channel customers ultimately choose depends on their needs, situational & contextual factors, and perceived channel characteristics. In addition, it is indirectly influenced by customer & product/service characteristics (see Figure 15). An important customer characteristic for sport fans is their current psychological connection to the fan object. Consumers compare channels based on benefits (e.g., channel quality and convenience) and disadvantages (e.g., channel costs and risks). Their needs change as they progress through CJ stages, making different channel characteristics important. For example, at the pre-purchase stage, consumers typically have a high need for information, which gives room to cost and risk avoidance at the purchasing stage. (Wolf & Steul-Fischer, 2023)

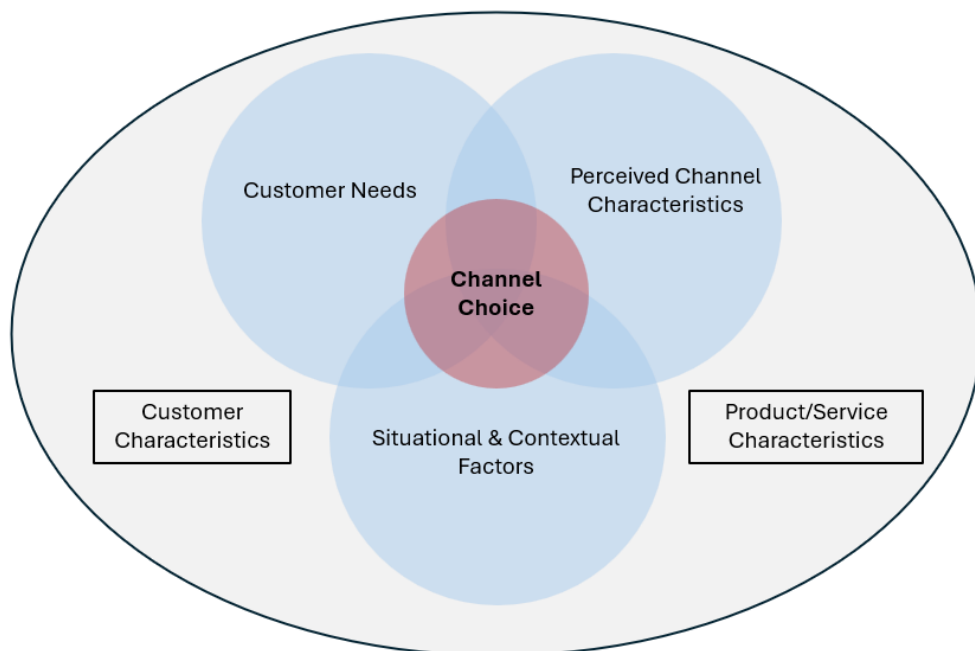


Figure 15: Conceptual Framework for Channel Choice (based on Wolf & Steul-Fischer, 2023 p. 1599)

This motivates channel switching and can lead to behaviors such as web- (online research, offline purchase) and showrooming (offline research, online purchase) (Kumar et al., 2017). During the pre-purchase stage, a fan might visit a physical store to try on his favorite player's signature shoe. After determining the fit, the switch to an online channel

occurs because more colorways are available at lower prices. Conversely, a fan who wants to purchase team merchandise might use a convenient online channel to browse options. After finding a product, he might then visit a physical store to assess its quality & fit and reduce the perceived purchasing risk. However, it is not always the case that consumers switch channels (Wolf & Steul-Fischer, 2023). In fact, researchers found that even in omnichannel environments, customers often prefer either online or offline channels. (Valentini et al., 2020) Nevertheless, especially firms with a complex offering still benefit from providing a seamless omnichannel experience to their customers. Although some results are mixed, studies have linked multichannel customers to higher loyalty, more sales, and more customer engagement (Neslin et al., 2006; Rahman et al., 2025).

By analyzing the CJ, firms can examine how and through which touchpoints customers interact as they progress through their journey. Although often difficult, it is crucial to identify the critical touchpoints with the greatest influence on desired outcomes, also known as moments of truth. (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) Insights can ultimately be used to create a CJ map, which is a visual representation of the CX across all purchase stages (Mele et al., 2025). Two graphics (see Figures 16 & 17), based on Alexandris et al., (2022) textbook, showcase how such a journey map for attending an NHL game might look like. To further illustrate the benefits of an omnichannel/phygital approach, Figure 16 first presents a map without access to internet-based technology. Figure 17 will then present a map of the same journey, but with internet-based access, illustrating how technology can reduce pain points, influence actions, and enhance the overall experience. (Alexandris et al., 2022)

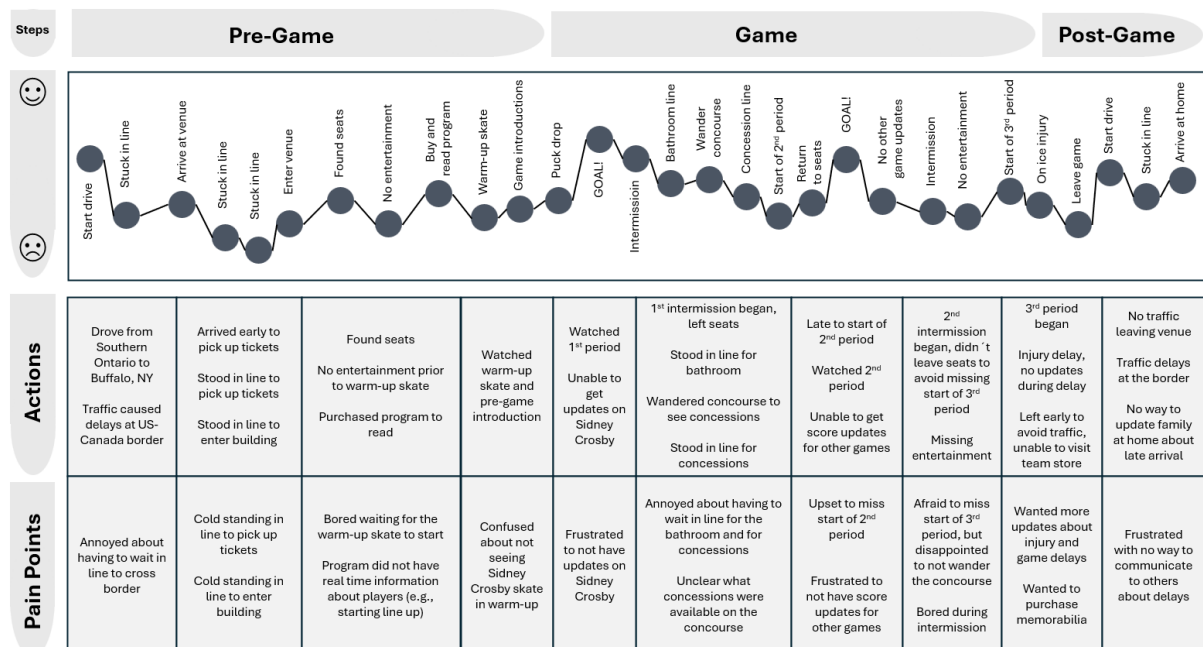


Figure 16: Journey Map for Attending an NHL Game without Internet-Based Technology (based on Alexandris et al., 2022, p. 313)

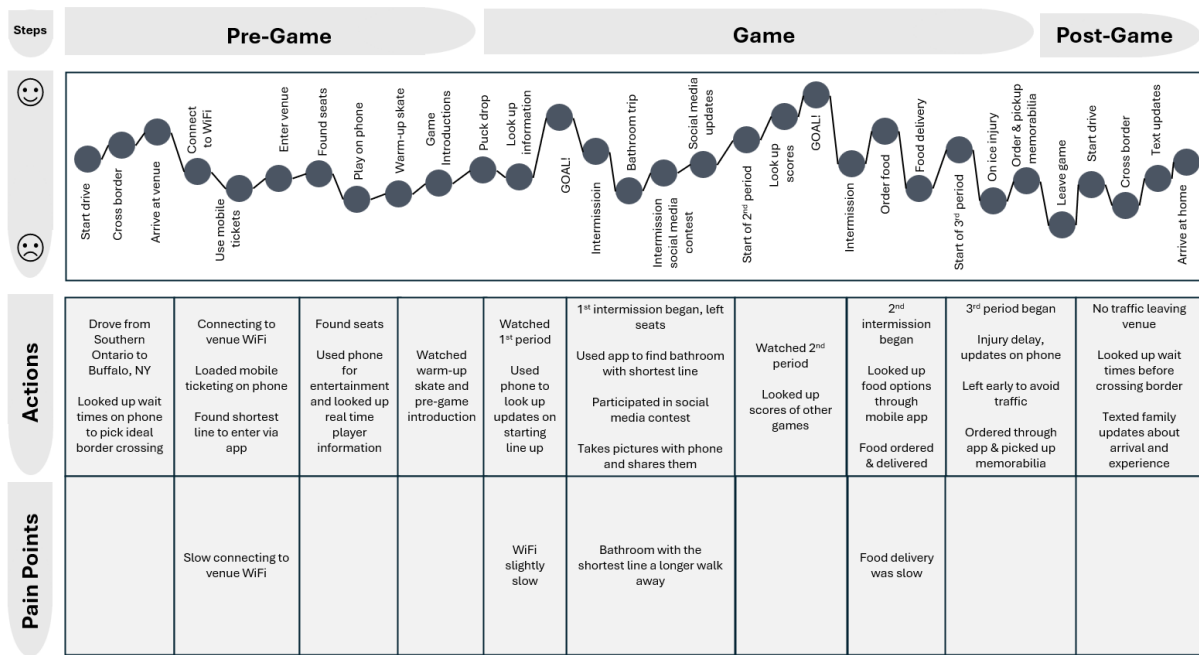


Figure 17: Journey Map for Attending an NHL Game with Internet-Based Technology (based on Alexandris et al., 2022, p. 314)

To include the organizational side of the process, service blueprinting can be used (Alexandris et al., 2022). It maps the delivery of a service process (e.g., arena experience) on different levels and usually entails five components, separated by three lines (see Figure 18) (Bitner et al., 2008). Identifying customer actions, all the steps a customer takes, in a chronological manner, is usually the first step in designing a service blueprint. Next are the onstage/visible contact employee actions. They occur as face-to-face encounters at the line of interaction (e.g., a fan interacting with a stadium steward). On a deeper level are backstage/invisible contact employee actions, separated from onstage actions by the line of visibility. As the name of this line implies, all actions above are visible, all below are invisible. Invisible actions include non-visible interactions with contact employees (e.g., answering emails) as well as other activities that prepare service delivery (e.g., cleaning the stadium, preparing food). Support processes are usually located at the bottom of a blueprint, separated from backstage contact employee actions by the line of internal interaction. These support processes encompass all activities performed by non-contact employees that are mandatory for service delivery (e.g., coding ticketing systems or customer analytics platforms, medical treatment of players, video analytics coaching). At the top of a blueprint, most often the physical evidence, tangibles that consumers encounter through their actions, are presented (e.g., external branding, stadium design). (Bitner et al., 2008)

Physical Evidence	
Customer Actions	Line of Interaction
Onstage/Visible Contact Employee Actions	Line of Visibility
Backstage/Invisible Contact Employee Actions	Line of Internal Interaction
Onstage/Visible Contact Employee Actions	

Figure 18: Service Blueprint Components (based on Bitner et al., 2008, p. 73)

Since its conception, the classical CJ has been extended to multiple related human roles to account for attitudinal and behavioral differences (Mele et al., 2025), such as user- (Pins et al., 2022) or stakeholder-journeys (Hollebeek et al., 2023). This thesis examines the role of sport fans and aims to conceptualize the fan journey. As the preceding elaborations have shown, fans exhibit numerous characteristics that distinguish their journeys from those of general customers. Fandom is not just the mere consumption of a sport product, but can become an integral part of one's identity, shaping behavior, attitudes, and social connections across many life and consumption domains (Chun & Sagas, 2022). It could be argued that most fans do not self-identify as customers but rather as members of a community. Fans have vastly different demands, depending on their personal connection to the team (Funk & James, 2016) and the strength of this connection constantly fluctuates depending on life stages (Tamir, 2022). Additionally, a rare longitudinal study of stability and change in sports fandom over time shows that even the same identification does not necessarily mean the same practices. How fandom is actually lived out rather depends on personal life changes (e.g., parenthood, job changes, geographic relocation) as well as structural changes (e.g., changing broadcast partner, team relocation) (Allison et al., 2025). Furthermore, fan interactions offer perfect opportunities to integrate phygital experiences, resulting in complex emotional responses (e.g., watching a game live, being instantly able to rewatch a highlight, and engaging in social interactions about it on social media) (Mele et al., 2024). Overall, these facts indicate that the fan journey is a complex phenomenon that needs a differentiated understanding.

3.3 Complexity Theory & Complex Adaptive Systems

Sport is complex and dynamic, which leads to emergent, interdependent behaviors that are difficult to forecast and manage. As technological integration in sports consumption increases, this complexity is expected to grow. It is at odds with deterministic methods, which are typically applied in sport research. They decompose complex challenges into individual components, although their interactions are essential to understand SCB. (McLean et al., 2025) Sport consumption and value cocreation occur within multiple, interlocked service ecosystems comprising many resource-integrating actors (Vargo & Lusch, 2016). Dyadic one-to-one relationships between fans and sports organizations neglect important social factors that drive sports fandom. Therefore, this thesis will examine the fan journey as a complex adaptive system (CAS) with many-to-many relations (Sturmberg, 2018). This is essential to fully respect the implications of service ecosystems proposed by S-D logic (Vargo et al., 2023).

Simple systems have one-to-one relationships, and behavior can be precisely predicted. Complicated systems are characterized by one-to-many relationships and are mostly predictable. Complex systems exhibit many-to-many relationships (e.g., any service ecosystem), making behavior difficult to predict. Because fans can learn and adapt their behaviors over time, they consume within a complex adaptive system. (Sturmberg, 2018) It should be noted that in systems theory, complexity is defined as *“the property arising from the interconnected behavior of agents.”* (Sturmberg, 2018, p. 24) Complexity theory moves away from viewing the world as mechanistic, linear, and predictable. Instead, it emphasizes that a CAS is characterized by interaction and self-organization (e.g., a fan choreography), feedback loops (experience influences psychological connection and vice versa), and nonlinearity (small changes lead to large outcomes and vice versa; e.g., one bad trade can ruin a franchise for years to come). This results in emergent properties, in which the outcome is not equal to the sum of its components, rendering a CAS irreducible. Sports spectatorship is simply the act of watching others participate in a sporting competition. However, the resulting fandom and its associated consequences at the individual and societal levels have far-reaching implications that cannot be predicted by looking at the underlying components in isolation. (Sturmberg, 2018) Furthermore, a CAS is characterized by path dependence, whereby initial conditions influence subsequent behavior. Fandom will develop differently depending on the initial state, such as becoming a fan of a regional team versus a team abroad. As fans learn and evolve, their journey evolves, resulting in the CAS's history. Future changes depend on past interactions. Furthermore, these systems operate between order and chaos. They require sufficient structures, rules, and stability to exist coherently and avoid dissolution, while allowing flexibility, novelty, and creativity to adapt and learn. (Turner & Baker, 2019) At last, CAS are open systems, meaning that actors are connected to one another within loosely defined boundaries. It should be noted that each CAS is a subsystem of larger supra-systems and has its own subsystems. (Sturmberg, 2018) The fan journey is, for example, only one of many complex adaptive systems (including contextual, personal, social, and psychological systems) that together create the fan experience. At the same time, the fan journey itself comprises smaller, overlapping subsystems, either related to

the sport object (e.g., a journey on game day) or to the social nature of consumption (e.g., a fan club).

Increased complexity can lead to a fragmented sports consumption experience if not properly managed. This is currently happening and also identified as a key challenge by industry leaders, stating: “*Fragmented systems lead to missed upsell and revenue optimization opportunities*” (PEAK, 2025, p. 15) and “*make it hard for leagues to operate efficiently*” (PEAK, 2025, p. 23). According to a Deloitte (2023) study, Gen Z fans follow teams/athletes across 3-5 digital platforms, which are, however, typically treated as silos. Due to the fragmentation of the streaming market, fans are unable to watch every game they would like to. Within a decade, the number of broadcasters required to follow the 15 most popular soccer tournaments in the UK has jumped from 4 to 10, resulting in a combined price increase of almost 60%. However, only 1% of fans are willing to invest in all services, with most subscribing to only three. (Sweney, 2025) Still, many feel they have to overspend on subscriptions and plan to cancel at least one subscription within the next year (Simon-Kucher, 2025). At the same time, fans are drowning in content, developing a desire for greater curation and relevance (WSC, 2025). The current main body of linear and dyadic CJ work cannot address this problem. A small remedy comes through Tax et al. (2013) concept of a service-delivery network (SDN). According to the authors, a sports fan’s experience would be built within a constrained SDN, in which two or more organizations are responsible for service delivery (e.g., teams, leagues, broadcasters). The notion of constrained means that a firm can dictate which complementary providers a fan can use, thereby increasing efficiency but reducing choice. Leagues and teams, for example, decide which partners can broadcast games or produce merchandise. However, in a fan context, the widespread availability of illicit alternatives (e.g., illegal streaming, counterfeit merchandise) can partially undermine this constraint. Fans serve as hubs of an SDN. They must engage in service coordination and select different service providers, which can be viewed as a resource-integrating activity. Firms should support customers in this process, for example, by reducing ambiguity and resolving network-related issues. Some service providers may have no formal agreement or connection. For example, on game day, a fan might choose an independent transportation provider to travel to the arena and must hire a babysitter, both of whom have no formal connection to the sports organization. While the traditional perspective on the service encounter treats interactions with each provider as separate, customers may evaluate them collectively. Having a long commute after a game because the public transport system is overcrowded may not only be perceived as a poor service encounter with the transport provider but could also negatively affect the overall gameday experience, harming other service providers. SDN enables viewing the customer journey as a complicated system with one-to-many relationships and demonstrates that sports organizations must consider their fit with complementary service providers. However, it fails to address the complex many-to-many relationships shaping the fan experience. Although the authors note on the side that an SDN may include fellow customers if they contribute to service delivery, they do not elaborate and account for complexity properties. (Tax et al., 2013) Furthermore, positioning the fan as the hub in an SDN goes

against the S-D logic concept of A2A service ecosystems, in which all actors are seen as fundamentally similar entities engaging in service exchange (Vargo & Lusch, 2016).

In general, CX literature fails to address the properties of complexity. It acknowledges that the experience is a dynamic, cyclical process. Still, the attribution of touchpoints is calculated in an additive, sequential manner (Koch et al., 2023), thereby disregarding nonlinearity and emergent behavior. A previously encountered touchpoint may contribute more to the overall experience, depending on interaction effects with other touchpoints. Even in the most recently available review, the customer journey is still conceptualized as linear and iterative (Mele et al., 2025). However, there are scholars who challenge these notions. In a review paper, Tueanrat et al. (2021, p. 348) stated following questions as an important research agenda: *“In what contexts [does] the customer journey [...] not follow a linear and sequential pattern? What are the alternative patterns and structures of the customer journey?”* By viewing the fan journey as a CAS, this thesis can advance these agendas. The last theory needed for conceptualizing a complex fan experience is the recent conceptualization of smooth & sticky journeys by Siebert et al. (2020). By positing two types of customer journeys, the concept can help de-fragment the fan experience (Siebert et al., 2020).

3.4 Smooth and Sticky Journeys

Siebert et al.'s (2020) concept of smooth and sticky journeys examines the long-term evolution of customer experience journeys across multiple service cycles. In sports fandom, cyclical consumption can be observed at multiple levels. Repeated single-game consumption is, for example, cyclical. It could also be examined by season, and in some service offerings, the duration of a service cycle can be configured (e.g., monthly/yearly subscriptions). The smooth journey model is based on the prominent notion that experiences should be consistent and predictable (Frow & Payne, 2007; Homburg et al., 2017) and synthesizes the literature on CX management. The authors, however, observed that some customer journeys intentionally feature uncertainty (e.g., social media or gambling). Thus, by synthesizing literature on addictive services and subsequent empirical research, they conceptualized a sticky journey model, focused on unpredictable journeys (see Figure 19). (Siebert et al., 2020)

The smooth model describes journeys in instrumental service categories (e.g., banking, insurance, business hotels). Customers are viewed as jobbers who want to have their tasks completed efficiently. In the initial cycle of the smooth journey model, the dominant CX management literature assumes that consumers engage in a highly deliberate DM process. At this point in the CJ, firms compete for attention and should provide “decision support” during every phase of the process. This could include brand advertising & content marketing during initial consideration, interactive website tools during evaluation, offers and in-store advertising at the point of sale, as well as informational materials and service updates during use. Firms should show all their purchase offerings during the initial cycle, as customers are highly motivated to evaluate them. During subsequent service cycles, the customer would like to minimize his DM efforts to reduce his cognitive load. Thus, the CX should be streamlined by eliminating unnecessary steps

(e.g., automatic subscription renewal), anticipating preferences (e.g., personalization), and providing just-in-time support. These journeys aim to create satisfaction through convenience and predictability, thereby reducing the need for customer deliberation. This enrolls them in routinized, at best, automated consumption cycles. They are also referred to as loyalty loops and comprise retriggering, repurchasing, and reconsumption processes. These loops can theoretically continue indefinitely, but in practice, they may be terminated after loyalty-weakening incidents (e.g., a critical service failure or overall inferior service relative to competitors), leading the customer to reenter the deliberate DM process. (Siebert et al., 2020)

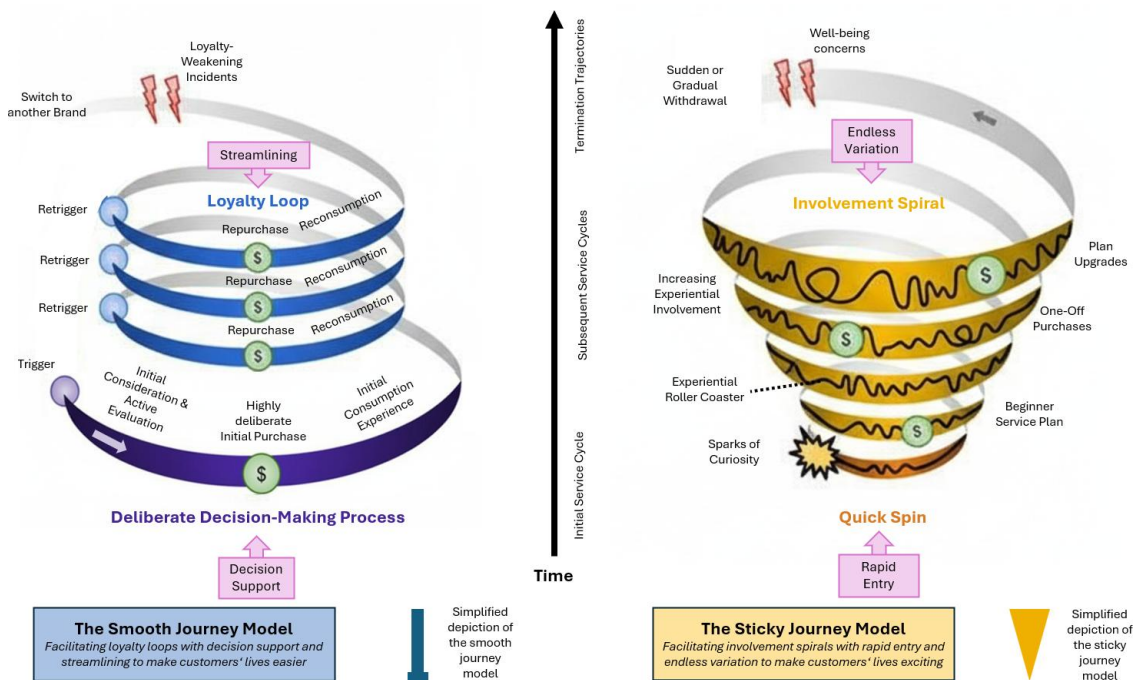


Figure 19: A Visualization of the Smooth and Sticky Journey Models (based on Siebert et al., p. 50)

In contrast, the sticky journey model applies to recreational services (e.g., gaming or sports), and customers are seen as adventurers who enjoy and explore the experience. Most often, enthusiastic reviews from existing customers spark curiosity and motivate individuals to try the service briefly, often without much deliberation. In fact, during the initial cycle, firms should aim to eliminate the DM process by providing customers with instant access to a basic version that offers exciting, key aspects of the service. Traditional onboarding practices should be avoided, and rapid entry facilitated (e.g., through easy account setup). If the service cannot be accessed quickly and easily at no or little cost, attention may shift to more accessible alternatives. The initial cycle is conceptualized as a quick spin that rapidly generates excitement. Although some customers wanted only to try the service briefly, the experience of easily accessible fun draws them back into subsequent cycles without much prior deliberation. By offering endless variations of the core service experience, involvement with the firm increases across subsequent service cycles. The authors call this phenomenon involvement spirals. The ability to offer this infinite variability is enabled by the expansiveness of the service system, frequent additions, subtractions, and changes, as well as unique configurations of those elements at each service encounter. Short-term effects of

involvement spirals result in a highly unpredictable pattern of positive and negative emotions in rapid succession, referred to as the experiential rollercoaster. (Siebert et al., 2020) In the long term, sticky journeys can increase experiential involvement, which builds over time and is defined as “*a person’s interest in the cognitive, emotional, sensorial, behavioral, and relational dimensions of a service experience.*” (Siebert et al., 2020, p. 57) With each cycle, the customer gains new relevant competencies. One-off purchases or upgrades to a premium plan should be enticed later in the spiral, as experiential involvement has accumulated. Firms sometimes must be patient and should not pressure customers to upgrade, as they develop involvement at their own pace. Organizations should also recognize the value of short-term, low- or nonpaying customers, since having a respectable number of active members is often crucial to success. The termination of sticky journeys is driven by either brand-specific factors (e.g., boredom, changing preferences) or fluctuations in service usage due to well-being concerns, as users begin to feel “addicted” to them. Customers tend to withdraw from services, reenter at some point, and then withdraw again. (Siebert et al., 2020) A prominent example of a service offering that can be described by the sticky journey model is Fortnite. Entry is free and easy, driven by others' recommendations. There are endless variations in the form of seasons and new game modes. Purchase behavior is more strongly influenced as experiential involvement increases. Customers may discontinue playing for brand-specific reasons or for well-being concerns. Table 10 summarizes the insights about both models.

Dimensions	The Smooth Journey Model	The Sticky Journey Model
Brief overview	Firms enroll customers in loyalty loops by offering them decision support during the initial service cycle and streamlining across subsequent service cycles; the resulting customer journey is predictable, easy, and smooth	Firms enroll customers in involvement spirals by offering them rapid entry into the initial service cycle and endless variation across subsequent service cycles; the resulting customer journey is unpredictable, exciting, and sticky
The initial service cycle	<i>Service design principle:</i> providing customers with decision support at each phase of the deliberate decision-making process via brand advertising, content marketing, interactive tools, and so on	<i>Service design principle:</i> providing customers with rapid entry via easy account setups, free basic access, and beginner orientations, avoiding traditional onboarding practices such as questionnaires, sales pitches, and servicescape tours
	<i>Customer journey pattern:</i> internal/external triggers motivate customers to undertake a deliberate decision-making process consisting of four phases: (1) initial consideration of multiple brands, (2) active evaluation, (3) moment of purchase, and (4) consumption experience (visualized as a large purple curve at the base of Figure 19)	<i>Customer journey pattern:</i> enthusiastic reviews from existing customers and third parties spark potential customers' curiosity to take the service for a quick spin, usually on a whim, without much deliberation (visualized as a small orange curve at the base of Figure 19)
Subsequent Service Cycles	<i>Service design principle:</i> streamlining the customer journey by (1) eliminating unnecessary service elements, (2) anticipating customer preferences, and (3) providing just-in-time information at each service encounter	<i>Service design principle:</i> endless variation along the customer journey via (1) an expansive set of service system elements, (2) frequent additions, subtractions, and changes, and (3) unique configurations of those elements at each service encounter
	<i>Customer journey pattern:</i> a loyalty loop, defined as a cyclical pattern of predictable experiences that reduces the need for customer deliberation and builds customer loyalty over time (visualized as a small blue helix in Figure 19)	<i>Customer journey pattern:</i> an involvement spiral, defined as a cyclical pattern of unpredictable experiences that motivates greater customer involvement over time (visualized as a widening upward yellow spiral in Figure 19)
Termination trajectories	Brand switching triggered by loyalty-weakening incidents	Service usage fluctuations fueled by well-being concerns
Purchase Patterns	Deliberate purchase decisions at first, routinized or automated purchases later (during the loyalty loop)	Free or low-cost plans at first, premium service plans and one-off purchases later (during the involvement spiral)
Application contexts	Instrumental service categories, wherein customers are jobbers and tend to be loyal to one brand: • Banking (e.g., Citibank) • Business hotels (e.g., Marriott) • Insurance (e.g., MetLife) • Mail/Parcel (e.g., FedEx) • Pharmacies (e.g., MedPlus) • Repairs (e.g., Mr. Appliance) • Telecom (e.g., Verizon) • Transportation (e.g., Amtrak) • Utilities (e.g., British Gas) • Work apparel (e.g., Van Heusen)	Recreational service categories, wherein customers are adventurers and often use multiple brands at once: • Dating apps (e.g., Bumble) • Dramatic serials (e.g., HBO) • Driving clubs (e.g., Jeep Jamboree) • Content networks (e.g., Instagram) • Fast fashion (e.g., Zara) • Gaming (e.g., Fortnite) • Group fitness (e.g., Orange Theory) • Lifestyle media (e.g., Thrillist) Meal kits (e.g., Blue Apron) • Music discovery (e.g., Spotify)
Builds on	This model synthesizes insights from several CXM texts	This model synthesizes insights from relevant texts on addictive services and empirical research on sticky journeys in the contexts of CrossFit, Pokémon Go, and Tinder

Table 10: A Comparison of the Smooth and Sticky Journey Models (based on Siebert et al., 2020, p. 49)

Firms should select the type of journey based on whether they offer instrumental or recreational services. When operating in a multiservice environment, they can try to sustain customer journeys by interlinking them in six different ways (see Figure 20).

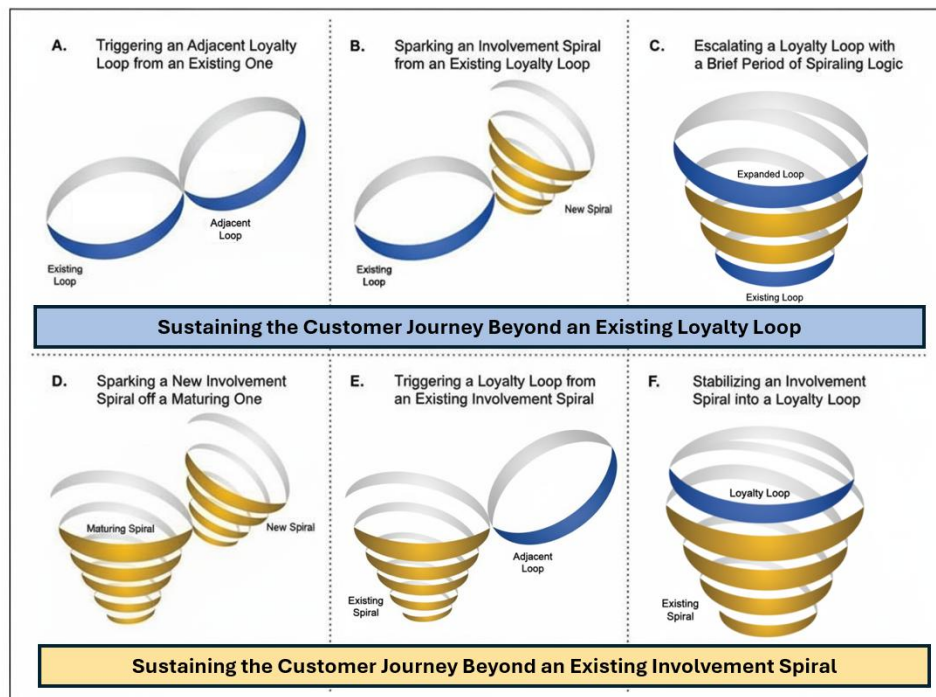


Figure 20: Sustaining Customer Journeys in Multiservice Ecosystems (based on Siebert et al., 2020, p. 59)

Having customers in multiple loops and spirals simultaneously reduces the risk of customer attrition. For the following examples, an imaginary sports team is used. If the customer is already on a smooth journey, firms can use strategies A, B, and C. The existing loyalty loop could be a season ticket membership. The team can try to trigger a loyalty loop by contacting season ticket holders on a special occasion and offering them free, redeemable drink vouchers for the next three games. This can entice the fan to enter a deliberate DM process about drink options and might stabilize in regular purchasing behavior. The team could also try to spark an involvement spiral. Instead of issuing redeemable vouchers, they surprise the fan with complimentary special drinks at the next three games (e.g., signature cocktails). This might motivate the fan to do their own exploratory purchases. Finally, the team can attempt to escalate the loyalty loop through an involvement spiral. It could offer a regular-season ticket holder a premium experience for the next three games. This might lead a fan to upgrade the season ticket, thereby expanding the loop. In turn, if customers are caught up in an involvement spirals, firms can use strategies D, E, and F to extend the journey. A maturing involvement spiral can be extended by sparking a new one. A fan might interact with a team on Instagram within an involvement spiral. However, involvement fluctuates due to concerns about social media-related well-being or brand-related factors, such as a growing dislike of short-form content. By promoting their other content formats (e.g., YouTube videos or the official team app), teams could spark a new spiral. They can also attempt to trigger a loyalty loop from an existing spiral, for example, by promoting free events temporary access to a streaming partner. If service delivery is satisfactory, the broadcaster can begin

streamlining the experience and does not need to invest in prior decision-support efforts. Lastly, a spiral can be stabilized into a loop. A fan might have been in an adventurous relationship with the sport team and always staying up to date with the latest, unpredictable information. This highly time-intensive behavior conflicts with other role demands, leading to fluctuations in usage. To stabilize the journey, the team could enroll him in a regular newsletter that summarizes all important information in a predictable format. This keeps the fan involved, while making their own, more effortful explorations superficial. (Siebert et al., 2020) As the next chapter will show, these interlinking mechanisms can be the key to de-fragmenting the fan experience.

4. Conceptualizing the Sports Fan Experience

Based on the previous chapters, it is evident that fan experience requires a different treatment from that of common CJs. The broad range of consumption possibilities, as well as their sociological and psychological consequences, make consumption a complex phenomenon. In the following subchapter, this thesis will present several propositions on fan experience design that can inspire new practices among industry professionals and guide future research by scholars. Proposition 1 is concerned with the sticky nature of fan journeys. Proposition 2 introduces an institutional perspective to involvement fluctuations. Proposition 3 comprises two sub-propositions that together conceptualize the fan experience as a dynamic fan journey ecosystem. Proposition 4 examines how the experience as a participant of a given sport relates to the experience as a fan.

By integrating insights from SCB with these propositions, the thesis will subsequently provide managerial recommendations. The propositions and recommendations are purely conceptual. Further empirical analysis will be needed to validate them. Some possibilities for empirical validation, as well as newly inspired research avenues, will be given in the outlook on future research.

4.1 The Propositions

Siebert et al. (2020) introduced a new journey model that competes with the dominant CX management literature. Summed up, these newly conceptualized sticky journeys are characterized by low entry barriers, curiosity, low deliberation, quick spins, high variation across repeated encounters, and escalating involvement over time. Interestingly, these characteristics align well with central features of sports fandom.

A fan's awareness stage depends on extrinsic factors, such as socialization agents. In the sticky journey model, often enthusiastic reviews from existing customers (e.g., friends, family, social media influencers) spark curiosity, leading individuals to engage without much deliberation and briefly try the service. For example, fandom is often either inherited or individuals have their first encounters through friends. Access to basic content is widely available (e.g., apps, media outlets, and social media). Furthermore, sports consumption is characterized by an expansive service system and endless variations. Sport outcomes cannot be predicted with certainty. Injuries or coaching changes, for example, can derail entire seasons and careers, leading to uncertainty and frequent adjustments to the system. Additionally, complex, often uncontrollable fan-to-fan interactions create novel and relational experiences. Many consumption options exhibit a unique configuration of service elements across repeated encounters, shaped by their respective, constantly adapting service ecosystems (e.g., each gameday experience is a unique configuration of players, staff, and fans interacting with one another). Positive experiences, whether from the sport itself or from social interactions, can lead to sustained reengagement through “quick spins”. Over time, experiential involvement accumulates and becomes enduring as the fan progresses through the PCM stages. Individuals experience their fandom as a rapid succession of positive and negative emotions (Aiken et al., 2018; Bee & Madrigal, 2012), described by Siebert et al. (2020) as

an “experiential rollercoaster”. The team might have won a semifinal match, prompting celebration, but the next day, the franchise player is injured in practice, leaving fans devastated. Nevertheless, the team ultimately wins the final game, again resulting in happiness. As involvement builds up, the sport organization can try to trigger a purchase. In accordance with the sticky journey model, consumers are rarely forced to upgrade, with a free basic service almost always available. In fact, some fans might follow their object of fandom for years, staying up to date with the latest information, without ever having paid anything. Lastly, the sticky journey concept was derived from literature on addictive services. In their subsequent empirical research, the theme of feeling addicted to the journey recurred in participant interviews. This expression of addictiveness also emerged in various qualitative studies on fandom (Levental et al., 2023; Tamir, 2022). Passion can turn to obsession, resulting in compulsive sport consumption which is associated with diverse negative consequences (Aiken et al., 2018) and service fluctuations may occur due to well-being concerns. Taken together, the characteristics of sport consumption closely mirror the defining features of sticky journeys, leading to the first proposition.

Proposition 1: The sports fan experience inherently includes elements of sticky journeys.

As the SX framework (see Figure 13) shows, sport consumption occurs within an artificially constructed context. Leagues, for example, control the rules of the game and potential consumption windows. However, fans often still have a wide range of consumption options. Thus, although they experience the sport product within structures, they also have some degree of agency. This is captured in S-D logic’s notion that institutions and institutional agreements enable value cocreation (Vargo & Lusch, 2016). Structuration theory is a popular theory concerned with the interplay between structures and agency (Whittington, 2025). It has been previously used in the general sport context (Home & Jary, 2004) as well as specifically on fandom (Bell et al., 2020; Dixon, 2015). Studies show, for example, how female fandom gets constrained (Dixon, 2015), and cocreation gets enabled by structures (Bell et al., 2020). The central idea of the theory is the duality of structure. It is both the medium and the outcome of human agency. When encountering a structural influence, individuals either reproduce or amend that structure, co-creating the environment. (Whittington, 2025) S-D logic can help in explaining how these structures emerge in social service systems. Actors integrate and exchange resources. As interactions are repeated, patterns form and become taken for granted. Thus, institutions (e.g., rules and norms) emerge to govern exchanges within the service ecosystem. Interactions between these systems are enabled by institutional agreements. As actors engage in resource integrating processes, the system adapts, which results in evolving institutions. (Vargo & Lusch, 2016) Structuration theory posits three interrelated dimensions of structure that shape interactions. (see Figure 21) (Whittington, 2025).

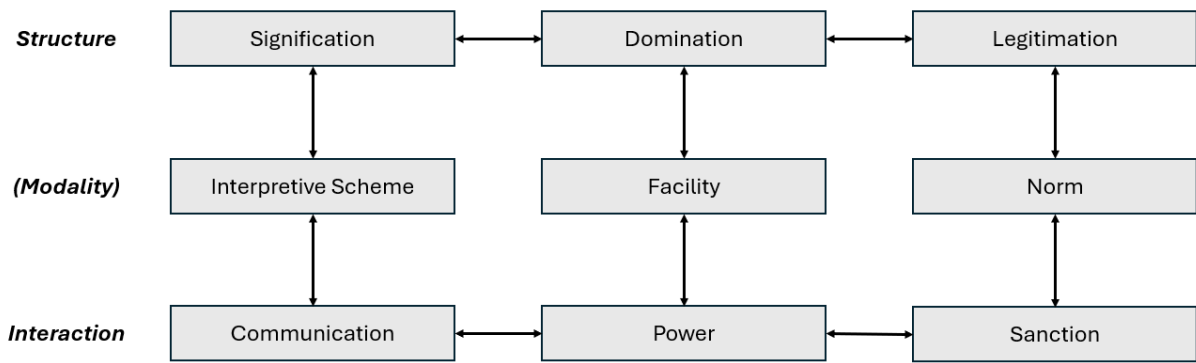


Figure 21: Structuration Theory (based on Whittington et al., 2025, p.116)

Signification structures refer to the discourse and symbols that shape behavior. They come, for example, in the form of fan jargon or team branding and influence communication interactions. This structure is enacted by individuals who draw on an interpretive scheme when communicating to make themselves understood. Legitimization structures are normative frameworks that define acceptable and sanctionable behavior. They can take the form of legal constraints or embodied, unwritten codes. Actors draw on these norms when judging the appropriateness of a behavior. Lastly, domination structures concern power dynamics. By controlling either more authoritative (who gets a say) and/or allocative (material) resources, actors gain structural power and can dominate the shaping process. To exert this power, so-called facilities are used, such as rights that determine ownership over an allocative resource. (Whittington, 2025) In a fan-related service ecosystem, sport organizations often control a substantial share of authoritative and allocative resources. Leagues, for example, have immense funds, can change rules, set the calendar, and control the distribution of content and image rights. Note that some star players also have significant structuring power. Lionel Messi's move to the MLS or Cristiano Ronaldo's move to the Saudi Pro League have affected the trajectories of the leagues and their new teams (OneFootball, 2024). As a result, fans tend to replicate these structures. However, they don't have to. An amendment can be small, such as not watching an important game, even though it is considered the norm, but it can also take on large dimensions, such as fan protests against investor deals (Meadows, 2024).

Sport organizations must recognize their significant influence on institutions that govern fan behavior. It has become common for the significance of a competition to increase over time. Leagues control this rise in involvement by shaping signification and legitimation structures through their authority and by allocating more resources to late-season events (e.g., greater media coverage, enhanced broadcast presentation, and more fan-activation events). Season-based leagues (e.g., the NFL) allow involvement to accumulate throughout the season. While it may be acceptable for a fan to miss some early-season games, later games are often central events. As the playoffs approach, significance increases. Communication changes, and more extreme fan behavior is legitimized. This intense involvement is likely to peak at the final game of the season. During the off-season, situational involvement declines, as signification, legitimation, and allocated resources decrease. Friendly matches or small, intermediary tournaments

are often not taken seriously. This reduces normative pressure to consume and narrows the sport product's consumption possibilities. Fewer journalists, for example, means less coverage of the product, and decreased service offerings reduce the number of consumable product extensions. As a new cycle begins at the beginning of a new season, the baseline level of involvement is expected to align with the fan's current PCM stage. It should be noted that event-based leagues (e.g., UFC) and competitions (e.g., World Cup) also exhibit natural fluctuations in involvement, although with different cycle lengths. Other factors, such as life stage (Tamir, 2022), geographic relocation, or social changes in the environment (Allison et al., 2025), also influence fluctuations in involvement. These factors are not directly controlled by sports organizations but still significantly affect the fan experience. Thus, organizations should not neglect them but instead make efforts to help their fans navigate them by providing adequate structures. For example, life-stage constraints, such as parenthood, could be mitigated by offering family-friendly services, and geographic relocation may be mitigated by establishing fan chapters in other cities. Additionally, strong signification and legitimation structures may motivate the fan to enact this role rather than others. A fan perceiving a game as highly significant, for example, might stay up late and skip out on work the next day (Aiken et al., 2018). The interplay of structure and agency, which is dominated by sport organizations, yields Proposition 2.

Proposition 2: Cyclical involvement fluctuations get coordinated by institutions, which are mostly designed and maintained by sport organizations.

Obviously, the resulting institutions not only influence fans' involvement but also their overall experience throughout their journey. However, this distinction may be redundant, since greater involvement should be the primary objective in designing the fan experience, as it is associated with higher attitudinal engagement and behavioral complexity (Funk et al., 2011). Additionally, this proposition focuses on cyclical fluctuations in involvement, as they can be central to the sticky dynamics of sport fan journeys. According to Siebert et al. (2020), fluctuations in sticky journeys often arise from concerns about well-being. Having a sport fan in a constantly escalating spiral is likely not sustainable in the long term. Overly obsessive fandom has been associated with negative social, personal, and psychological consequences (Aiken et al., 2018). Decreased involvement can help allegiant fans mitigate them to some extent. It, for example, allows one to take on other role responsibilities, such as love-partnerships, which can sometimes suffer from intense fandom (Levental et al., 2023), before fully reengaging at the beginning of the next season. By introducing short-term, cyclical involvement fluctuations that are coordinated by institutions, the proposition relates to and extends the general notion of fluctuating involvement in PCM literature.

However, a fan journey entails more than just sticky journey elements. Clearly, it thrives on uncertainty and escalating involvement. Nevertheless, as fandom progresses, it often gives rise to elaborate decision-making processes and ritualized behaviors (McDonald & Karg, 2014), which are better described by the smooth journey model. A fan who, for example, subscribes to a broadcasting provider is likely to undergo an elaborate DM process in the initial phase and to seek a predictable, reliable, and streamlined service

experience in subsequent cycles. Additionally, as shown earlier, fans consume on multiple, isolated platforms simultaneously (Deloitte, 2023). They interact with the sticky, unpredictable core product through numerous product extensions. These product extensions are offered by different actors (e.g., the team itself, broadcast providers, public viewing locations). Experience with the core product influences perceptions and desired benefits of product extensions, and vice versa. When a fan interacts with a product extension through a new provider, an entirely new customer journey begins. Fans may interact with a broadcasting company to watch their favorite team's games. From the provider's perspective, these are customers, each on their own journey. Multiservice providers should seek to convert fans into customers of their other service offerings. Fans who, for example, subscribe to the football Bundesliga offering by Sky, might be upsold in subsequent service cycles to other Sky packages such as "Sky Entertainment Plus", which offers movies and shows (Sky, 2026). Merchandisers such as Nike, can use jersey sales as a first touchpoint with their brand. As shown in Figure 20, this can be achieved by interlinking journeys. A critical service failure may terminate the customer journey with the service provider, thereby affecting the experience with the core product. For example, a cancelled broadcast subscription, resulting in no access to live game broadcasts, significantly constrains sports consumption. However, the core product remains consumable through numerous other consumption options across other journeys. Fans can still watch the team live at the stadium and follow the latest news for free on social media platforms or other media outlets. This aligns with findings that unsatisfied fans rarely switch teams, but rather simply reduce their level of consumption (Alexandris et al., 2022). The apparent coexistence of multiple, interrelated customer journeys that make up the fan experience yields Proposition 3.

P3: The sports fan experience is built through numerous, dynamically interrelated customer journeys, conceptualized as a sports fan journey ecosystem.

To illustrate Proposition 3, Figure 22 shows an exemplary, simplified fan journey ecosystem (FJE) over time. For example, it contains only one journey with a media outlet (e.g., Instagram), whereas fans likely use multiple platforms to gather information (e.g., YouTube, ESPN, or Bleacher Report). It depicts the cyclical journey models found in Figure 19. The sticky journeys are cone-shaped to show the increasing involvement. Smooth journeys are T-shaped to illustrate a streamlined experience, after an elaborate DM process in the initial service cycle. Smooth journeys that stabilize a sticky journey are not depicted with an initial elaborate cycle. While some cognitive processing occurs as the consumer transitions from an involvement spiral to a loyalty loop, most active decision-making has been replaced by the experience that got built up through the sticky journey. The red lightning shows the termination of a journey, and double-headed arrows signal the existence of feedback loops within the FJE. As described above, experience with the core product affects the experience with product extensions, and vice versa. Thus, the fan journey ecosystem will contain core product journeys that are made consumable through product extension journeys. As shown by Proposition 1, sport and social encounters inherently involve sticky elements. Therefore, core product journeys are characterized as sticky. They fluctuate in size to illustrate the cyclical involvement

fluctuations described in Proposition 2. The involvement that builds up with the core product reflects the psychological connection central to the PCM, as it encompasses all sport and social encounters. Product extension journeys can be sticky or smooth, depending on the nature of the service and the customer's current stage in that journey.

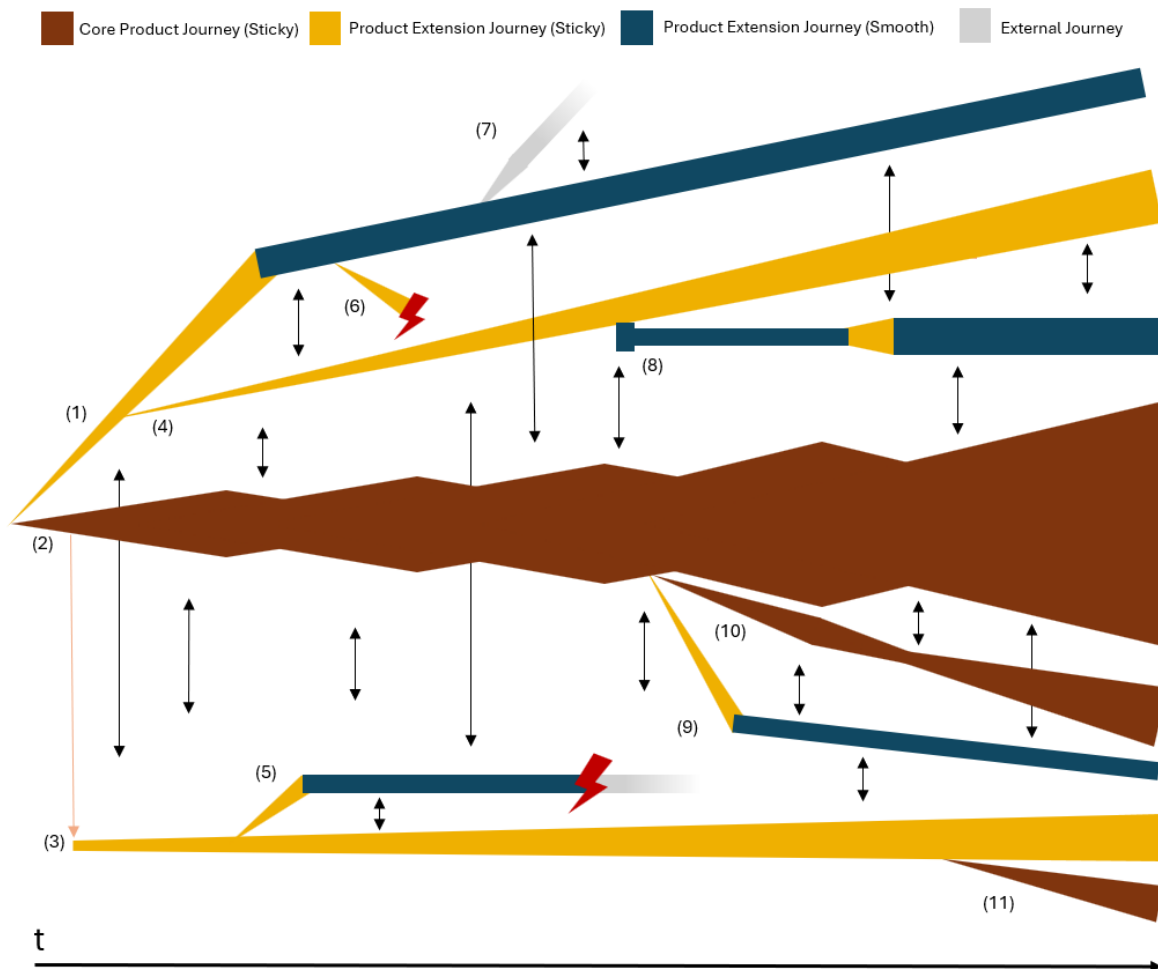


Figure 22: A Simplified Sports Fan Journey Ecosystem

The following narrative example, based on Figure 22, illustrates how an FJE for a fan named Jeff might develop. The descriptions will be numbered to indicate which journey in the illustration each relates to. There are several ways to initialize an FJE. Since it results in an interlinked web of journeys, path dependence exists, and each system has a unique history. If the first encounter occurs, for example, in a stadium instead of at home, different knowledge sets about participation opportunities develop, which will influence future DM. At the beginning of the FJE, Jeff had no prior knowledge of professional sports. He wants to meet his friend, but the friend is unavailable because he is already at home watching a basketball game with others. However, he invites Jeff to join them. As Jeff is free anyway, he comes over, interacts with the other people at his friend's house, and watches the game a bit. At this point, the FJE is initialized, and product extension and core product journeys are separated. By watching the game for free at his friend's house, Jeff embarks on what could be described as a sticky journey with the broadcasting provider (1). He tries the service without costs and quickly experiences its central features. At the same time, a sticky journey with the core product is initialized, as he becomes aware of

consumption possibilities (2). The game broadcast provides the sport encounter, and the other people Jeff meets at his friend's house constitute the social encounter of the core product. A few weeks later, Jeff gets invited again by his friend to come over and watch a game with the rest of the group. Driven by a motive for diversion and socialization, Jeff comes by. This time, he is more engaged in the broadcast. Over time, Jeff builds up more involvement. This prompts him to seek out more freely available content. He begins watching team highlights on social media (3), again described as a sticky journey. Note that this journey does not have a sharp tail because it already exists outside the FJE, and Jeff has previously built involvement with the platform. However, both journeys now become interrelated. The social media experience creates sport product encounters, influencing the relationship with the team, while at the same time social media use itself is influenced by fandom. The strength of this interrelation depends on the extent of involvement in each journey. Highly identified fans are more likely to watch sports content on social media than fans at the awareness stage. Conversely, fans who spend much of their time on social media are more likely to be influenced in their core product journey by a social media platform than those who engage less. If a fan decides to terminate their social media use for well-being reasons unrelated to sports consumption, it will constrain sports consumption.

The next time Jeff visits his friend's house, he is even more engaged. Knowledge gained from the social media platform influences the experience of the broadcast and the core product. While watching the game, Jeff and his friends see an advertisement by the team itself. It promotes a free public viewing event next weekend. The group decides to go there. This enrolls them in a sticky journey, directly with the team, as a service provider (4). The event may be organized by third-party providers commissioned by the sports organization. However, service experiences, positive or negative, will still be attributed to the team as long as the third parties are not salient providers in the service delivery network (Tax et al., 2013). For example, although the team conducted due diligence and engaged a reputable event organizer, a failed event attributable to the organizer's poor management would likely be ascribed to the team. Aside from creating sport encounters, such community events enable numerous social interactions, which are a crucial part of the core product. Experiences with the team, whether as the provider of the core product or as a product extension, must be kept separate. If fans perceive the team as a poor service provider, this will have a significant negative impact on their core product journeys, as it substantially constrains consumption. However, they can still engage with the sport product through other service providers (e.g., instead of watching at the stadium, watching at home). Especially large webs of interconnected journeys, likely to be found in highly involved fans, can stabilize the FJE to some extent, even if a crucial journey is terminated.

At the next game, Jeff's friend is out of town. The broadcast provider (1) can use this to trigger Jeff's first small purchase by offering cheap, paid access to the single-game broadcast. Because Jeff has become attracted to the team, his prior engagement encourages infrequent, single-time purchases. As fandom progresses, the broadcaster stabilizes this sticky journey (1) in a loyalty loop by enrolling him in a subscription

package. They could, for example, have sent Jeff a discount voucher for their subscription service after he previously purchased single-game access. Since involvement has already been established and the service has been tested in a repertoire market, this loyalty loop can be entered without the deliberate DM process that is otherwise required for smooth journeys. The provider can use this smooth journey to enroll Jeff in other journeys offered either by the provider itself or its partners. Journey number 6 could represent a sticky offering, either by the broadcaster (e.g., ESPN enrolling a broadcasting customer with its fantasy sports offerings (ESPN, 2026)) or by a partner (e.g., through a promotion on ESPN, the fan embarks on a journey with a sports gambling partner). Either due to well-being or brand-related reasons, journey 6 is terminated. Providers within the FJE can also initiate journeys outside the ecosystem that do not directly influence the fan experience (7). ESPN customers may be enticed to purchase other products from its parent company, Disney. However, these external journeys cannot be entirely neglected, provided they remain connected to a journey within the FJE. A critical service failure may still influence the product extension journey and, consequently, the core product experience. For example, recent Disney boycotts for political reasons have led to millions of cancelled streaming subscriptions, including ESPN (Barnes, 2025).

While scrolling through social media (3), Jeff sees an advertisement for a ticket platform that offers substantial discounts on the next three purchases. Given Jeff's increased interest in the team, this results in a sticky journey, as he briefly tries the offering. Satisfactory service delivery can make the platform the primary provider of sports tickets and enable a smooth cycle of retrigger, repurchase, and reconsumption. If the platform sells tickets for other events, it could escalate the fan journey and become the primary provider of additional ticket types. All these interrelated journeys create feedback loops, as illustrated by double-headed arrows. It is obvious that the relationships quickly become complex. The experience from one product extension journey influences the experience on the core product journey, which, in turn, impacts all other journeys within the FJE. At times, these experiences with product extensions influence one another directly. A positive experience on the ticketing platform after interacting with an advertisement might entice the fan to place greater trust in the social media platform as an advertising channel. As shown earlier, multiple providers contributing to service delivery can be conceptualized as a service delivery network (Tax et al., 2013), in which assigning service failure to a single provider can become unclear. A ticket that fails to scan in may have been caused by the ticket platform, but the failure may also be attributed to the team, and vice versa. The FJE extends beyond SDNs by introducing sticky core product journeys at the center of sports consumption that are not controlled by a single provider. Rather, they reflect the sum of all encounters with the sport and other fans, which are difficult to regulate and even occur outside the SDN. Thus, service providers within an FJE can never deliver value on their own. They simply make the core product accessible, forming an inseparable relationship. It illustrates again that product extensions depend on the core product, while the core product's value depends on these extensions.

Over time, Jeff has come to identify with the team, has a strong psychological connection, and would like to attend games regularly. As he progressed through the PCM stages, attitudinal engagement and behavioral complexity increased, as reflected in the web of product extension journeys. The next time Jeff attends a game, he participates in a fan challenge and wins a discount voucher for any season ticket package. This entices Jeff to examine the different season-ticket offers. Due to increased involvement, he can cognitively form an attitude (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Solomon, 2020) as he compares different packages during the initial DM process. He decides to purchase a base offer, thereby enrolling him in a loyalty loop (8). In later cycles, the sports team escalates the loop by briefly entering a spiraling logic (as shown in Figure 20), prompting Jeff to upgrade his package. While journey 8 begins, journey 5 will be terminated, at least within the FJE, since Jeff no longer needs the ticket provider to purchase sports tickets. However, if the platform has managed to escalate Jeff's journey and persuaded him to use it outside a sports context, this journey will continue beyond the FJE, and Jeff will continue to build the customer experience with the provider. If sports ticket purchases become attractive again (e.g., due to season-ticket cancellation), these experiences will determine whether this smooth journey is reintegrated into the FJE or whether Jeff initiates a new DM process to seek a new sports ticket provider. As he regularly attends team events, he makes many interpersonal relationships. Some fans invite him over to their fan club. Jeff starts hanging out at the club before games, which enrolls him on a sticky journey with the fan club as a service provider. As Jeff becomes an official member of the club, he begins paying the membership fee, behavior becomes routinized, and the process becomes smooth. This journey provides a predictable context for the sticky social encounters on the core product journey and enables personal relationships. The members of the fan club constitute a subgroup distinct from the superordinate group identity encompassing all team fans. In some cases, even a relational group that exists outside of the sport context forms. These smaller groups offer greater potential for close relationships (Lock & Funk, 2016) and strongly affect Jeff's fan identity, shaping perceived roles (Chun & Sagas, 2022) as well as relational and collective ties (Koo et al., 2025). The explanations regarding Figure 22 clearly illustrate that an FJE comprises multiple interrelated product-extension journeys, which leads to proposition 3.1.

Proposition 3.1: A sports fan journey ecosystem entails multiple, dynamically interrelated product extension journeys, conceptualized as the product extension ecosystem.

Lastly, it should be noted that sport actors (e.g., leagues, organizations, coaches, and players) maintain strong brand relationships with one another. A strong league brand positively influences the value of teams within the league, and vice versa. (Kunkel et al., 2013) Playing for a popular team can influence a player's personal brand. In turn, having a squad full of players with strong personal brands can increase interest in a team. Since consumers are able to form psychological connections with numerous objects (Trail et al., 2003), they tend to engage with multiple related sport actors. A study on Australian sports fans by Kunkel et al. (2013), found that while some fans are mostly involved with either a team or a league, most have a similar psychological connection to both (see

Figure 23). Note that every individual who is allegiant to either fan object is at least attracted to the other.

Team	Allegiance	0	6	35	65
	Attachment	18	18	110	22
	Attraction	50	189	50	4
	Awareness	65	66	14	0
		Awareness	Attraction	Attachment	Allegiance
		League			

Team Dominant

Co-Dominant

League Dominant

Figure 23: Sport Brand Involvement Matrix (based on Kunkel et al., 2013, p. 185)

Another study by Lock et al. (2012) shows that as fans interact with the team, they get to know the players. In the awareness and attraction phase, players are perceived as an amorphous, faceless group. In later stages, as knowledge accumulates, preferences for certain players emerge. (Lock et al., 2012) These results indicate that the overall fan experience depends on psychological connections to numerous fan objects and their interactions. In Figure 22, this is illustrated by journey 10. As Jeff’s connection with the team progresses, he gets to know the players and becomes a fan of their point guard. This results in a new core product journey that includes direct in-game encounters with the player and social interactions with other fans of the player. There are many factors that can spark a new core product journey. A psychological connection to a player, for example, can also develop after multiple encounters with the player’s highlights on social media (11). Other fans and close relationships can serve as socializing agents that support the development of attraction toward new sport actors. Sometimes the initiation process is started even outside of a professional sports context. For example, in a process called “reverse socialization” parents can develop fan interest in a new sport due to their child participating in it (Hyatt et al., 2018).

In Figure 22, these additional core product journeys were developed relatively late in the FJE. This was done for illustrative purposes, as this Figure focuses on the explanation of product extension journeys. In reality, many of these core product journeys develop early in the system. As Jeff watches the team’s first games, he gains an understanding of the league, players, and other teams. As this is his first encounter with these sport entities, it

equals the start of a new journey with each. After prolonged fandom, he is likely aware of hundreds of sports actors. However, because individuals in the awareness stage have not yet considered active engagement (Funk & James, 2016), these journeys have little influence on the FJE. Only when fans become attracted do they actively engage, the core product journey becomes salient, and the FJE adapts accordingly. The existence of multiple core journeys within the FJE and their interrelations are illustrated in Figure 24. Each of these journeys is consumed through the product extension ecosystem. Some core product journeys have unique product extensions, but many extensions are shared. For example, any sport can be accessed via social media platforms, and broadcasters often offer multiple sports and leagues in a single package.

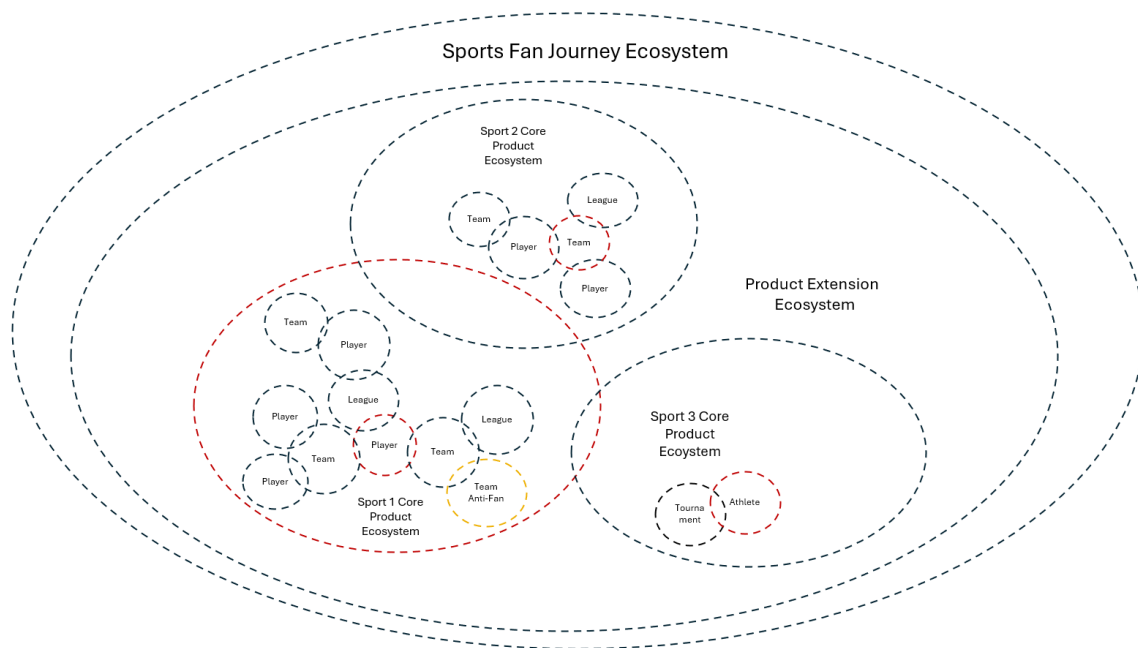


Figure 24: Visualized Core Product Journey Interactions

Figure 22 and its implications will again be explained through a narrative example of a new sports fan named Frida, who is not yet aware of any professional sport. She is, however, a Taylor Swift fan. As the pop star begins dating footballer Travis Kelce, Frida becomes aware of the player, which can easily develop into attraction. In fact, after the musician began attending NFL games, Kelce's jersey sales increased by 400%, and female viewership of his team reached new heights, with some age groups seeing increases of more than 50%. Social media has been a crucial product extension journey, the NFL generated 170 million impressions with posts from Taylor's first appearance (Fatemi, 2023). As Frida becomes a fan of the player, she also gets to know the team, other players, and the league. The psychological connection to most sport actors stays in the awareness stage, but Frida builds attraction to some. Social interactions with other fans contribute to increasing involvement with certain actors. As her fandom for the player strengthens, she develops an attraction to the team he plays for, and over time, she also comes to like other players on that team. As fandom with the team progresses, she starts to enjoy the league in general. By following highlights from around the league, she builds attraction with a player from a different team. After a while, she also begins to like that other team.

All these core product journeys can be understood as distinct, interacting, and conflicting fan roles. Thus, they have a hierarchy, meaning one core product journey will always dominate the others. This is indicated in Figure 24 by the red circle. Frida is primarily a fan of a player and thus always cheers on the team he plays for. If this player switches teams, she will primarily support the new team rather than the previous one, as she predominantly supports him. Although the psychological connection to the previous team likely declines, it persists to some extent. If that team is in another league, there will be fewer role conflicts in whom to support. However, if both teams either play against each other or during the same time slots, one role must be chosen over the other. This depends on enduring involvement with the team and the sport context, as illustrated by the cyclical involvement fluctuations mentioned in Proposition 2. It appears that the fan role hierarchy is dynamic and constantly adapts. Currently, the fan experience is dominated by the psychological connection to the player, which is especially prone to change. Clubs may exist for centuries, but sports careers are short-lived, and if this player retires, the current second role in the hierarchy will become the primary role. For example, this might be the player's last team, any previous team, another player, or the league as a whole. All core product journeys within a specific sport constitute the collective experience with that sport as a spectator, conceptualized as a core product ecosystem. It is worth noting that multiple core product journeys are sometimes managed by the same club, making them tightly interrelated (e.g., FC Barcelona also offers professional soccer, basketball, handball, roller hockey, and futsal). Lastly, the existence of anti-fandom (Gray, 2003) (illustrated as a yellow circle) should be mentioned. Through the team she supports, Frida gets introduced to their rival. Over time, she develops a disliking, but is still somehow invested in the team, staying up to date with the latest information to enable in- and out-group comparisons. These anti-fan core product journeys influence Frida's experience, as a loss against a rival, for example, weighs heavily and the fan journeys to other sport actors may be terminated if they join the rival.

Over time, Frida gets to know other sport actors through her product extension journeys, which often provide access to various sports. As she has realized personal and social benefits through sport consumption, she is more easily enticed to try offerings from other sports and becomes attracted to a soccer team. Through this team, she also becomes attracted to other soccer actors. The resulting second core product ecosystem comprises sport and social encounters related to soccer spectatorship, and together with the initial core product ecosystem, influences the overall sports fan experience. Over time, interest in different sports may develop, and multiple interrelated core product ecosystems may emerge. Allegiant fans of a sport have developed extensive consumption skills and knowledge, showcased in a complex web of journeys. These enhanced capabilities can facilitate access to other sports, particularly those that are semantically similar. Consumption of soccer and football, for example, requires a more similar knowledge set, as both are seasonal team sports played with a ball and two competing teams, in contrast to event-based, individual sports. Nevertheless, later in her fan journey, after reading about a track & field athlete who inspires her, Frida becomes a track & field fan. Even though these core product journeys may be harder to develop, they seem desirable, since given their semantic differences and other supporting factors, such as different event

calendars, the emerging ecosystem is less likely to collide with previous ones. The extent to which these ecosystems influence the overall sports fan experience varies with the number of core product journeys within them and the fan's involvement in each. It should be noted that these ecosystems are likely dominated by a primary sport (indicated in Figure 24 by a red circle). Frida might always choose football over other sports if they conflict. However, a sport's dominance can change. In particular, consumption constraints and significance, as well as social interactions, are crucial to this process. If Frida is primarily a football fan, but an unimportant regular season football game conflicts with a highly significant soccer final, she might instead choose soccer engagement. If she moves to a country where no one watches football, her psychological connection to the sport might decline, as fewer opportunities for consumption and less social exchange exist. The preceding elaborations clearly support the existence of multiple, dynamically interrelated core product journeys across different sports, yielding proposition 3.2.

Proposition 3.2: A sports fan journey ecosystem entails numerous, dynamically interrelated core product journeys conceptualized as multiple interacting core product ecosystems.

Introducing propositions 3.1 and 3.2, motivates the examination of the FJE as a complex adaptive system on different levels. The FJE, as a suprasystem, comprises multiple subsystems, namely a product extension ecosystem that interacts with numerous core product ecosystems. At a lower level, these subsystems can be seen as suprasystems, entailing multiple distinct journeys, each of which is its own CAS. Because CAS are open systems, they interact with one another and with systems external to the FJE, including social, psychological, personal and other contextual factors. A very important system that closely interacts with core product ecosystems, and thereby strongly influences overall fan experience, is the experience of an individual as a sport participant (see Figure 25).

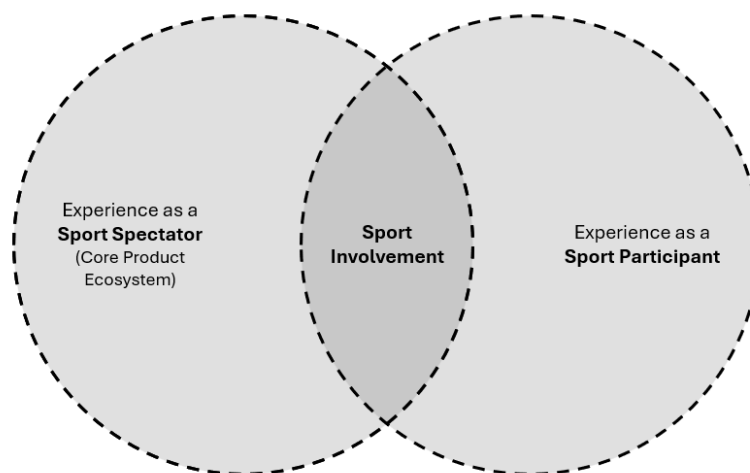


Figure 25: Sport Participation and Spectatorship constitute the overall Sport Involvement

A core product ecosystems, as conceptualized in Proposition 3.2, entails only the individual's experience as a spectator, which contributes to involvement building with the sport. However, this involvement can be developed not only through spectatorship but also through participation (Shamir & Ruskin, 1984). A longitudinal study on 111 Taiwanese

elementary school students, for example, shows that attending a sports camp can increase the intent to watch that sport (Gau et al., 2024). Through participation, consumers gain knowledge of the sport, its rules and values, and come to appreciate the athletic skills required to play it. As they become more involved, entry barriers to professional sports consumption decline. Individuals might also form social relationships with other participants who are already strongly connected to the sport and who might serve as socializing agents to professional sports later on. In turn, watching a sport may motivate participation behavior and influence behavior through vicarious experiences. Together, experiences as a spectator and as a participant constitute the involvement with a given sport. This notion is reflected in the fact that the most popular professional sports also have high levels of recreational participation (e.g., soccer, basketball, and football). Sports with participation barriers (e.g., golf or dressage riding) seem to have less mass appeal, perhaps because they are harder for individuals to relate to.

Research on this topic is sparse and has yielded mixed results. According to Thrane (2001), individuals who regularly participate in physical activities are 17% more likely to attend sporting events. Furthermore, a conference contribution at an EASM conference suggests that sports participants exhibit stronger spending behavior and increased intention to attend matches. Interestingly, 75,7% of team sport participants stated they will attend matches in the coming season, compared with only 53,7% of participants in individual sports. (Lee et al., 2017) These findings, again, reflect the social nature of sports fandom. However, participation and spectatorship have been linked to distinct determinants and motivations (Lera-López & Rapún-Gárate, 2011; Shamir & Ruskin, 1984), and Lera-López & Rapún-Gárate (2011) found no direct relationship between sports participation frequency and sports attendance frequency. Nevertheless, the shared contribution of spectatorship and participation in shaping a collective experience of a given sport cannot be denied. No resulting influence on fan experience, rather hints at missed opportunities by sport actors to capitalize on increased overall sport involvement. While both must be fostered in different ways, their interrelationships should not be overlooked, yielding Proposition 4.

Proposition 4: A core product ecosystem interacts closely with sport participation experience, as both constitute the overall sport involvement.

In summary, the overall experience of an individual as a sports fan is conceptualized as a sports fan journey ecosystem. It continually adapts and comprises product extension and core product ecosystems, each entailing multiple interrelated journeys. These interactions produce emergent, unpredictable behavior, rendering the sports fan experience a complex phenomenon. Table 11 summarizes the propositions.

The Five Axioms of S-D-Logic	
<i>Proposition 1</i>	The sports fan experience inherently contains elements of sticky journeys.
<i>Proposition 2</i>	Cyclical involvement fluctuations get coordinated by institutions, which are mostly designed and maintained by sport organizations
<i>Proposition 3</i>	The sports fan experience is built through numerous, dynamically interrelated customer journeys, conceptualized as a sports fan journey ecosystem
<i>Proposition 3.1</i>	A sports fan journey ecosystem entails numerous, dynamically interrelated product extension journeys, conceptualized as the product extension ecosystem
<i>Proposition 3.2</i>	A sports fan journey ecosystem entails numerous, dynamically interrelated core product journeys, conceptualized as multiple interacting core product ecosystems.
<i>Proposition 4</i>	A core product ecosystem interacts closely with sport participation experience, as both constitute overall sport involvement

Table 11: The Propositions

4.2 Managerial Recommendations

As the FJE introduces an entirely new perspective on managing fandom, compared to the linear approaches typically used to examine sports consumer behavior, it yields numerous managerial implications, some of which will be presented in the following subchapter. However, given the sheer complexity and their dependence on the actor (e.g., different implications for organizations and players), this list is not conclusive and rather serves as an inspiration. Because of their ascribed structuring power and inherent connection to the core product journey, the recommendations will primarily focus on sport organizations. However, the FJE also has implications for providers of product extensions (e.g., broadcasters) and for smaller sport actors such as players, some of which will be mentioned. Nevertheless, individual reflection on the propositions, based on a given actor's capabilities and goals, is strongly advised.

4.2.1 Recommendations based on Proposition 1

Given that the fan experience is conceptualized as inherently sticky, sport actors should design it accordingly. Initially, they should spark curiosity and remove entry barriers to enable numerous quick spins. However, because a fan's awareness stage is characterized by no intention to engage in consumption, this can be challenging. Social media, as an ever-growing influencing factor, can be crucial in creating random and unintended interactions through its algorithms, which might spark interest. Furthermore, large cultural events (e.g., the Olympics or the World Cup) can spark curiosity, thereby creating high-involvement windows that sport actors can capitalize on (e.g., by offering a public viewing event in the stadium). In successive cycles, key content should remain free, and limited access to premium content should be granted from time to time. Especially live games could have great potential to strengthen the psychological connection, as they automatically introduce a social aspect to the sport encounter. Teams could offer free bring-a-friend tickets to season ticket holders, thereby enabling

the initial fan to serve as a socializing agent, or distribute free tickets for low-demand games (e.g., through public schools, sports clubs, or other community events). Given the enhanced potential for value co-creation as more actors enter the service ecosystem, this results in a win-win situation. They could offer open, free community events and other opportunities to interact with the team, such as a fan day (Edmonton Oilers, 2025), open training sessions (FC Bayern, 2026), or temporary free access to game broadcasts (NBA, 2022). This can give fans a chance to get to know the players, which supports PCM stage progression (Lock et al., 2012). In sum, free access must be widely available. Fans should be able to engage with the product without pressure to upgrade, and only in the late stages be enticed to purchase. This reflects in the recommendations that, at the awareness stage, sport organizations should adopt an educational rather than a sales perspective for marketing (Alexandris et al., 2022). Actors can use gradual paywalling, offering key content and narratives for free while hiding deeper, more analytical offerings behind premium tiers. As experiential involvement increases and the fan builds a stable attraction, a first small purchase can be triggered. According to PCM literature, experiences at the awareness stage should be designed to enhance pleasure involvement, whereas efforts at later stages should include sign and centrality involvement (Alexandris et al., 2022). Since sticky encounters are easy, experiential, and often social, they are strong at creating pleasurable experiences and can satisfy diversion and socialization motives linked to early PCM stages (Funk et al., 2009). Given that a fan's identity is crucial for building and maintaining involvement, teams should help in creating a strong one from the first encounter. Beyond aligning with personal identities (e.g., by acting morally responsible), enabling role identities (e.g., by appreciating fan roles and their contributions) and collective ties, it is crucial for actors to cultivate relational ties. They are a central part of the core product and in early stages, they can act as crucial socializing agents who facilitate access to the sticky sport experience, whereas in late stages they may lead to extraordinary fan behavior.

Sticky journeys are also characterized by endless variation. Since sports already have uncertain outcomes, organizations should lean into that and amplify experiential variability. They can, for example, create new content formats and game presentations (NBA, 2025) and design themed gamedays (NBA, 2026a), rotating rituals (e.g., new player walkouts and choreographies), varied side activities in the stadium concourse (e.g., pop-up fan art or interactive AR experiences), and surprise rewards for returning visitors. Players who seek to create a personal brand should offer insights into diverse aspects of their lives and personalities. By actively interacting with their fans, they can lower entry barriers. Organizations should also actively engage consumers in the experiential rollercoaster. Instead of dampening negative emotions after a tough loss, they should help fans make sense of it, thereby forming their identity. Teams can create a broader narrative after such moments (e.g., "part of a rebuilding story") and show behind-the-scenes reactions that allow fans to emotionally align rather than detach. Furthermore, they could introduce celebratory rituals that engage fans during highs and rituals to process disappointments during lows. For players, this means that they should express all their emotions, whether it is joy or anger and frustration, taking fans along with them

on their experiential rollercoaster. By sharing their perspectives and coping mechanisms, they become more relatable and might help highly involved fans manage losses.

4.2.2 Recommendations based on Proposition 2

Proposition 2 relates to the structuring power of sports organizations. It suggests that cyclical involvement fluctuations along core product journeys should actively be enabled, as they can sustain sticky experiences. Constantly pushing for maximal intensity can lead to obsessive fandom, which has been associated with numerous negative social, personal, and psychological consequences (Aiken et al., 2018), thereby sometimes resulting in service fluctuations due to well-being concerns (Siebert et al., 2020). Thus, sport organizations should embrace and maintain naturally occurring fluctuations and grant highly involved fans a break from time to time. However, it appears that the opposite is occurring at the moment. New competition formats are continuously introduced (e.g., the Kings League in 2022 and the Icon League in 2024), and organizations are increasingly producing off-field content. The potential burnout from sports media overexposure was already addressed by a Bleacher Report article in 2008 (Bleacher Report, 2008), and reflects in a recent survey on 1.000 U.S. sports fans, which found that the majority of American sports fans have grown tired of the NFL's wall-to-wall coverage (Wakefield Research, 2024).

Rather than trying to keep fans maximally engaged throughout the year, teams should create meaningful, high- and low-involvement windows. During high-involvement windows, they can leverage their broad reach, enabled by signification, legitimation, and domination structures, to raise awareness and build attraction. During low-involvement windows, fans should be given a cooling-off period. This does not mean that they should not be managed during the off-season. Teams should maintain a basic level of entertainment, focusing on reflection and building anticipation (e.g., a postseason documentary or insights into the training camp) through optional encounters. However, they should not attempt to increase involvement by filling the gap with urgent, must-see content (e.g., unnecessarily inflated off-season drama) and new “invented” competitions, which not only risk burning out fans but can also dilute significance. As off-seasons often bring changes to the team (e.g., new players, staff, and management), exciting experiences are bound to happen anyway. Teams could instead spend time introducing these new, unfamiliar faces to their fans, as this has been found to support PCM progression (Lock et al., 2012). They can also use a low-involvement phase in one region to create a high-involvement phase in others (e.g., international tours to underserved markets during the off-season (FC Bayern, 2025)). Through rituals and events organizations can signal the opening and closing of involvement windows. For example, throughout a competition cycle, opening events can signal the start of a new attempt to reach the top, while end-of-cycle events, such as gratitude ceremonies, could prompt reflection and a deliberate wrap-up. Teams can legitimize low-involvement windows by acknowledging that casual behavior during them is fine and does not conflict with the role of an avid supporter. As factors outside the FJE also significantly influence fluctuations in involvement (e.g., parenthood, career pressures), teams must provide adequate structures to help fans navigate them (e.g., by creating family zones). Players

should also normalize fluctuations in involvement through personal storytelling, by aligning their own brand with institutional cycles. They could, for example, produce performance- and competition-based content during the season and more community and cause-related content, as well as personal-life glimpses during the off-season, thereby legitimizing a life beyond sport. To prevent involvement from dropping during the middle stretch of a lengthy season (e.g., an 82-game NBA regular season), teams can introduce special events such as an in-season tournament or an all-star game. In general, teams can mitigate concerns about well-being by actively co-creating structures with fans (e.g., by considering work and school schedules). Neglecting them can lead to structures that constrain rather than enable fan behavior. This may culminate in avoidable, forced cocreation processes through fan amendment. For example, newly introduced Monday games in the German soccer Bundesliga were cancelled after massive fan protests because they conflicted with work schedules (Baldi, 2025).

4.2.3 Recommendations based on Proposition 3

The following section presents recommendations based on the third proposition and its two sub-propositions. Together, they conceptualize the fan experience as a sports fan journey ecosystem comprising multiple interrelated journeys. They align with the properties of service ecosystems as proposed by S-D logic and clearly illustrate that the fan experience is a complex phenomenon that leads to emergent, irreducible, and unpredictable behavior. Thus, sport organizations must move beyond reductionist, linear approaches when designing the overall fan experience. This does not mean that they do not have their place. When designing smaller experiences (e.g., a gameday), organizations can still view them as linear processes that influence overall fan experience. However, they should be aware that these encounters always interact with numerous factors within and outside the FJE, particularly the involvement throughout the core product journey. Thus, in the context of fan experience, linear processes still lead to nonlinearity. In addition to unpredictable feedback loops, the central reasons for engaging in sports consumption, which are either social or sport encounters, are characterized by uncertainty. Furthermore, the psychological connection to each fan object aligns and competes with the psychological connections to other fan objects. There is no single fan journey that makes up the overall experience. Rather, it is a web of entangled journeys. Lastly, CAS operate between order and chaos. They require sufficient structures, rules, and stability to exist coherently and avoid dissolution, while allowing flexibility, novelty, and creativity to adapt and learn. Therefore, sports organizations should move away from overly ambitious attempts to control complex and irreducible fan behavior and instead view themselves as enablers of autonomous fan experiences, especially in late PCM stages. This reflects insights from self-determination theory, which attribute many benefits to autonomous behavior. Interestingly, findings on the internalization of the locus of causality align well with the progression of PCM stages. While early processes depend on external factors (external regulation), later stages lead to personal importance (identified regulation) and, eventually, coherence with personal values (integrated regulation) as values are fully internalized. Sport actors must

incentivize accordingly and be aware of the undermining effect that highly salient extrinsic incentives can have on intrinsic motivation

As the consumer enters the FJE, behavior can be controlled to some extent. Initially, the FJE consists of a single core product and a single product extension journey. Behavior at early stages of fandom is extrinsically motivated. Given the social nature of core product journeys and the proposed influence of relational ties on extraordinary fan behavior, organizations should facilitate relationship formation. They could, for example, offer community events such as public viewings, enable tailgating and pre-game meetups, and create themed fan zones. In particular, relationships with highly identified fans can be crucial influencing factors, as they convey extensive knowledge of signification and legitimation structures, as well as the complex web of consumption opportunities. When fans encounter one another, each consumes within its unique FJE, which shapes their interactions. Sharing consumption preferences may support relationship-building. Although two allegiant fans have the same psychological connection, they might not connect if they consume within mostly different FJEs, reflecting different preferences. Thus, fans should be managed based on their FJE, not solely on their psychological connection, as an FJE already encompasses involvement. Sport organizations should design the journeys in the FJE sensitive to the PCM stage. At the outset, organizations should employ sticky dynamics to enable easy access and the formation of experiential and behavioral attitudes. As fans become highly involved, they can engage in deliberate decision-making processes, which facilitate smooth journeys. By offering free or cheap versions of products on repertoire markets as part of sticky journeys, which are eventually accessible through subscription markets, firms can lower entry barriers to smooth journeys. Broadcasters can, for example, offer temporary, free access to select special games and later enroll customers in their subscription services. As the FJE becomes more complex, the behavior within becomes increasingly uncontrollable. Sports organizations should adopt an enabler perspective and co-create appropriate structures for consumption. They should engage fans to actively participate in the value-creation process by supporting fan-driven experiences (e.g., inviting fan groups into matchday atmosphere planning or integrating user-generated content).

To understand fan trajectories, teams should identify possible journeys and map them out. On one hand, they must understand the core product journeys they directly interact with (e.g., players, teams, leagues), on the other hand, they must identify major product extension journeys (e.g., broadcast partners, fan clubs, third-party content producers, or social media platforms) through which the core product gets consumed. For each journey, teams should examine its role, whether it is sticky or smooth, and how it is currently connected to other journeys. Some product extension journeys probably dominate the fan experience, as they offer access to elaborate engagement with many core product journeys (e.g. DAZN basic subscription offers amongst others soccer, football, basketball, boxing, darts and motorsports). Touchpoints that facilitate journey interlinking must be identified, as they, on the one hand, introduce new product extension journeys to the FJE and, on the other hand, can be key to de-fragmenting the fan experience. In subsequent steps, firms should integrate weakly connected journeys by

deliberately interlinking smooth and sticky journeys. This can be challenging, as many providers compete for attention, which in turn leads to fragmentation. Teams cannot control this. Nevertheless, they can prioritize deeper integration with selected premium partners, which were previously identified as crucial to the fan experience. Sport organizations could push for a common ID across these premium providers. This enables data sharing and, thereby, the coordination of efforts, as well as easier fan navigation through the web of journeys. Reward systems could be tied to this ID, enabling a single loyalty experience across multiple platforms. Sport organizations can use rights negotiations to reward partners that commit to ecosystem integration. Social media platforms should be highlighted as increasingly important partners. As previously mentioned, they can create unplanned encounters during the awareness stage, and have been linked to impulse buying behavior. Additionally, social media journeys may already exist before the first sport encounter, making them a potential entry point to the FJE. However, as previously argued, encounters with the sport product on social media platforms are only co-owned touchpoints. Leagues that partner up with a social media platform could turn this into a partner-owned touchpoint and actively co-create value. Platforms could, for example, trade preferential treatment by the algorithm during a high-involvement window (e.g., a final game) for exclusive content. In the late stages, having the customer enrolled in multiple core product journeys can help stabilize fandom even if one is terminated. Nevertheless, sport actors should already offer numerous product extension journeys that can initiate an FJE, thereby serving different motives and interests (e.g., video games, broadcast, fan fest, etc.). As the FJE is dependent on the initial state, they could identify commonalities among fans based on their entry point and create paths through the ecosystem accordingly. For example, domestic fans who build their first experiences by attending live games will have a more similar experience to that of international fans whose first encounters are digital-only. However, even small differences can have big implications. A consumer's decision between two broadcast providers to watch a team, for example, might seem insignificant, but depending on the other offers each broadcaster has, the fan may be introduced to other sports. Providing an extensive set of well-defined paths that reveal as the fan navigates the ecosystem, can reduce a fan's struggle to differentiate themselves while fearing assimilation. The complex web allows autonomous, expressive behavior, and clear paths enable to do so without the fear of straying away.

The path a consumer takes is not only dependent on product extension journeys but also on the first core product journey. Early involvement with a sport actor has a significant impact, as it can restrain the development of a psychological connection to other actors. An allegiant fan of a team will likely not become a fan of a team they are in competition with. A fan who primarily supports a player may never develop a strong psychological connection to any team. Actors should be aware that they may not always be the dominant fan object. They must consider interconnections and role conflicts with other core product journeys and even whole ecosystems and adapt their behaviors accordingly. Player transfers are, for example, not only about success in sports but also, in large part, about fans. Interrelated journeys offer immense potential for leagues and teams. A primary example is Cristiano Ronaldo's transfer to Al-Nassr. In three days the teams

Instagram follower count increased from 853.000 to over 10 million (Wright, 2023) and as of February 2026 is close to 30 million (Instagram, 2026). However, these interrelations can also be detrimental if not managed right. but can also be detrimental if not managed right. The Dallas Mavericks' trade of Luka Doncic to the Lakers led to immense fan protests (Rothstein, 2025), culminating in the firing of the responsible general manager (McMahon, 2025). A poor split between the L.A. Clippers and franchise legend Chris Paul also drew backlash, with a die-hard fan publicly stating that he is terminating his Clippers fandom and will now support their rivals, the L.A Lakers (Talwalkar, 2025). Thus, sport actors must always be aware of their place within a core product ecosystem and respect the relationships that come with it. Additionally, collaborations across other core product ecosystems (e.g., social responsibility events coordinated across different sport leagues) can prove fruitful. Lastly, sport actors should also consider collaborations outside of the FJE, especially given the notion that early core product journeys are driven by motives which can also be found in other entertainment options (Funk et al., 2012). According to the personal investment theory, these other options will influence the motivation to engage in sports behavior. By integrating them, sport actors trigger awareness in entertainment seeking customers and mitigate consumption conflicts by enabling simultaneous consumption. For highly connected fans these collaborations can also serve as exciting service variations. Examples would be a One Piece and L.A Lakers game day collaboration (Luster, 2025) or Nickelodeon and NFL which created a kids focused broadcast, with appearances from cartoon characters (Clark, 2021). Lastly, actors have to be aware of anti-fan core product journeys. A player who chooses to join a disliked actor (e.g., movement to a rival club or a financially strong league that buys up talent) may lose a significant part of their fan base. Lastly, firms must consider, that sponsoring a team might lead to negative sponsorship effects in rival fan segments (Grohs et al., 2015).

Actors can use high-involvement windows in other core product journeys to promote themselves. For example, during a world cup, teams can provide public viewing experiences, or players can make TV appearances as experts. A study by Lock et al. (2012) shows a progression in the psychological connection to a team, as fans get to know the players. This suggests that core product journeys can stabilize one another. Thus, sport actors should not only compete for attention but, in some cases, foster shared attention. Leagues should highlight the narratives of their teams, and teams should promote the league as a significant competition. Players can provide personal behind-the-scenes access to the team (e.g., a facility tour or a practice vlog), and their teams can create player content on their channels (e.g., Q&A sessions). New core journeys introduced should be linked to existing journeys to facilitate easy entry. The NBA, for example, produced a behind-the-scenes documentary with Netflix, following star players for a season (Netflix, 2025). Especially minor and emerging sport actors should partner with established providers. Raising awareness is especially challenging for them, and only being available through a fragmented platform creates entry barriers. Full access to the German Basketball Bundesliga is, for example, exclusively available through DYN. As this broadcaster streams only smaller professional sports, such as table tennis and volleyball, fans of popular sports would need a separate subscription to access basketball coverage. The broadcast of a few games on an established journey (e.g., an

already existing Sky subscription) can create first encounters with the sport and raise awareness. As involvement has built up, fans can be enrolled in their unique product extension journeys. However, actors should always be aware that these journeys should be well integrated into the FJE. Thus, sport organizations should sometimes choose an established product extension, even though revenue has to be shared, especially at early stages. For example, content from FC Barcelona is widely available through numerous providers, but highly engaged fans can subscribe to comprehensive, exclusive coverage of the team through Barca TV+ (FC Barcelona, 2026). Vice versa, product extension providers should also be aware of core product ecosystems. Multi-sport broadcasters should, for example, identify segments of cross-sport fans at different levels (e.g., fans who watch team sports, or those who often watch basketball and soccer) and tailor their offerings accordingly. Throughout the year, they should enable the engagement of different fan roles (e.g., a fan watches the NFL season, which ends in February, and then engages as an NBA Fan, whose season peaks in June). and should avoid an offering that mostly consists of competing roles (e.g., games during the same time slots or seasonal calendars that peak at the same time). Leagues and other competitions, within and across sports, that share overlapping fan bases should coordinate their calendars to enhance the overall sports fan experience. Teams could become multi-sport providers, such as FC Barcelona, which, in addition to its soccer team, offers professional basketball, roller hockey, handball, and futsal. When one season ends, the fans can maintain their connection to the club by engaging in another. However, given the proposed service fluctuations due to well-being concerns, clubs should still grant cooling periods. Another core product journey with the club should not be marketed as an essential journey, but rather as a fun way to interact lightly with the team during a low-involvement window. When seeking to foster a connection with a fan who has already established a core product ecosystem, teams should target those with minimal role conflicts. It is unlikely that allegiant fans of a soccer team, will develop a similarly strong connection to a similar team, as it conflicts with their fan identity and often has simultaneous season trajectories. However, since the seasonal calendars of professional football and soccer only partially overlap and fan roles do not conflict, soccer fans might be enticed to try watching football, given their prior positive experiences with professional sports.

4.2.4 Recommendations based on Proposition 4

Proposition 4 suggests that core produce ecosystems tightly interact with participation in the given sport as both constitute overall sport involvement. Basically, individuals might become fans because they play a sport and vice versa. The respective recommendations are straightforward. Sport organizations should integrate and enable participation opportunities, for example by interacting with hobby clubs. They can sponsor tournaments, fund local teams and schools, or distribute merchandise to hobby clubs for giveaways. Furthermore, professional clubs can offer participation opportunities themselves. FC Bayern, for example, offers sports such as handball exclusively as recreational activities for members, while also fielding recreational teams in sports the club also competes in professionally, such as basketball and soccer. Teams can also offer sport camps, charity matches with players and selected fans, or teaching content (e.g., a

social media video in which a player teaches a drill or a trick). Because they involve social interactions, participation in team sports should be more likely to turn a participant into a fan than participation in individual sports. Additionally, youth sports may have a greater potential, as it is less likely that a strong psychological connection to a competing sport actor has already formed. Table 12 summarizes the propositions.

Proposition	Recommendations
Proposition 1 (Sticky Nature)	• Design sticky experiences sensitive to the psychological connection • Embrace the uncertainty of sports consumption • Do not dampen negative emotions, but frame them • Use social media platforms to create unplanned interactions
Proposition 2 (Involvement Fluctuations)	• Enable involvement fluctuations • Grant fans cool-down periods • Create clear high- and low-involvement windows and manage them accordingly. • Use the low-involvement phase in one region to create a high-involvement phase in another • Co-create adequate structures
Proposition 3 (Fan Journey Ecosystem)	• Don't try to control, but try to enable an autonomous fan experience • Stabilize fan experience through a complex web of journeys • Identify interrelations and centrality of journeys • Identify touchpoints that facilitate journey interlinking • Prioritize deep integration with selected premium providers • Design the FJE sensitive to the psychological connection • Manage fan experiences according to the entire FJE not only the psychological connection • Combine sport encounters with social encounters and facilitate the formation of relational ties • Provide different paths depending on the initial state • Be aware of the dominant core product journey and core product ecosystem • Combine marketing interventions with high-involvement windows in other core product journeys • Link new core product journeys to established journeys. • Not only compete for, but sometimes foster shared attention • Enable the engagement of different fan roles throughout the year • Target fans from other sports with minimal role conflicts. • Be aware of anti-fan core product journeys • Consider collaborations with entertainment options outside of the FJE
Proposition 4 (Participation & Fandom)	• Enable and support participation • Integrate participation • Target youth sports • Especially relevant for team sports, given their social nature

Table 12: Managerial Recommendations based on the Propositions

5. Conclusion

5.1 Summary

By integrating insights from S-D logic, sports consumer behavior, customer experience management, and complexity theory, this thesis conceptualizes the fan experience as a sports fan journey ecosystem. It comprises a product extension ecosystem and numerous core product ecosystems, resulting in complex, irreducible interactions. Thus, a key takeaway from the concept is that sport actors must step back from the dominant causal and deterministic approaches usually applied when designing the fan experience. They should not aim to control emerging behavior, but rather view themselves as enablers of uncertain, exciting experiences. A complex web of journeys can stabilize the fan experience, even if some journeys are terminated. Therefore, it may explain why sport fans rarely switch their fan object after service failures. Additionally, the concept may explain the rare case of a fan switching brands, as it can be interpreted as a change in the dominant core product journey. The fan does not terminate his psychological connection to the team, but, due to fluctuations in involvement, core product journeys are reprioritized. This may be because a service failure has made the dominant core product journey less attractive, or because another core product journey has become more attractive on its own. Applying the interlinking processes proposed by Siebert et al. (2020) across services and journeys can contribute to the de-fragmentation of the sports market. The FJE extends Siebert et al.'s (2020) concept, by using it to connect multiple journeys from distinct providers instead of just multiple services from a single provider. Additionally, the concept advances different explicitly stated research agendas. Since the FJE is a CAS, it addresses properties of many-to-many relationships, including path dependence, nonlinearity, and self-organization. Thus, it contributes to customer experience management literature, namely Tueanrat et al.'s (2021) call for identification and examination of contexts in which customer journeys stray away from linear patterns. It also advances the PCM, in line with calls from the originators (Funk & James, 2016), by integrating the psychological connection into service experience design. The rising attitudinal engagement and behavioral complexity are reflected in an increasingly complex FJE. The concept shows that stable fandom is not only a matter of deep attitudes but also depends on ecosystem diversity and complexity. Sticky journeys drive involvement, which gets stabilized by loyalty loops. Fluctuations occur when key journeys terminate or degrade, but they can be buffered by other journeys in the ecosystem.

5.2 Limitations

Although the propositions are derived from an extensive body of well-established literature from multiple disciplines, they are purely conceptual. Missing triangulation across quantitative and qualitative studies limits validity, and further empirical research is advised. Additionally, the sticky journey model is relatively new and thus lacks a great body of empirical evidence. However, since its 2020 publication in the *Journal of Marketing*, it has been highly influential, with hundreds of citations. Furthermore, it cannot be denied that the sticky journey model more accurately describes certain fan

experiences than the dominant, well-established smooth journey model. This thesis did not address some relevant factors influencing fan behavior, such as demographics and personality, or technology-enabled industry shifts. Legalized sports gambling is disrupting the U.S. market (Novemsky, 2025) and technologies such as AI (NBA, 2025b) and VR (NBA, 2025a) are reshaping how fans view and interact with the game. However, the omitted insights were deliberately neglected as they were not needed to formulate the propositions. Additional theories and technological trends further complicate sports consumption, thereby supporting the FJE concept rather than refuting its propositions. Thus, this primarily limits the recommendations. Furthermore, the recommendations are not validated, general in nature and mostly refer to sport actors, due to their structuring power and inherent connection to the core product. Product extension providers must also be considerate of the various interrelations. However, tailored recommendations depend heavily on the type of actor and individual capabilities, which are beyond the scope of this thesis.

The examples used throughout this thesis are biased because the author self-identifies as a sports fan, which influences the theorizing process through personal experience. They include only popular and professional Western sports and are heavily NBA- and team-sport-centric. Journeys with amateur teams might be less complex as they are available through fewer product extensions. However, they may also be more complex, as fans can assume larger roles as contributors (e.g., volunteering to support the local club). FJEs dominated by individual sports might develop differently as athletes are often not part of a salient team. Additionally, the synthesized literature largely originates from Western authors, thereby overlooking cultural differences. Finally, for some emerging topics in the sports consumption market, industry reports, which may be commercially biased, had to be used.

5.3 Contribution to Sports Management

The fan journey ecosystem can help sports managers design adequate and connected fan experiences. By illustrating different journey types and their possible interrelations, it shows how the interdependent psychological connections to multiple sports actors within one fan are simultaneously formed by and facilitate experiences with numerous service providers. Thereby, it can help managers to tackle the current fragmentation of consumption opportunities. It challenges the dominant reductionist perspective on fan experience design and encourages managers to adopt a holistic approach. They must always be mindful of their place and connections within the FJE as it constantly adapts, and value in any given service ecosystem is always cocreated by multiple actors. The concept implies that as complexity increases, in combination with the inherent uncertainty in sports, fan experience becomes uncontrollable and sports actors should rather focus on embracing and enabling unpredictable, exciting experiences. Specifically Chapter 4.2 gives multiple clearly formulated recommendations that can be used by sports managers in practice.

5.4 Future Research

Future research can be divided into two strains. On the one hand, it can validate and refine the propositions, on the other hand, it can pursue new avenues inspired by them.

In general, the concept should be refined by experts using the Delphi method. Proposition 1 can be validated using various methods to identify sticky journey elements. Qualitative methods, such as interviews or netnography, could be used to examine fans' perceptions about the stickiness of the experience. Engagement data, such as log-ins or time spent, can be used to identify quick spins. Proposition 2 could be validated through a longitudinal panel that tracks involvement throughout the season. Furthermore, studies should verify the existence of fan burnout and explore its impact on well-being and behavior. Proposition 3 can be further studied through workshops, in which fans map out their journeys. Big Data approaches can enable multi-journey-tracking. Central nodes, clusters, and holes can be identified via network analysis. Through vector autoregression modelling and subsequent testing for Granger causality and impulse response functions, feedback loops can be examined. The development of FJEs and the outcomes of interventions can be simulated through agent-based modeling. Studies can also examine how fragmentation, respectively de-fragmentation, influences behavior. Proposition 4 can be tested through longitudinal studies that track sport participation and its relationship to fandom over time. Single interventions should also be evaluated. Clubs can, for example, offer a sport camp during the holidays and afterwards track either intention to engage or actual behavior. The impact of interventions should also be examined by sport type and demographic factors, such as age. Lastly, studies can examine differences between digital (e.g., eSports) and physical participation. Digital participation might convey more knowledge specific to the sport actors, but physical participation may result in more social connections and a deeper appreciation of the required athletic skills.

Future research could determine whether fans perceive core product and product extension journeys as distinct. Studies can also inspect the impact of different interlinking mechanisms. Since core journeys can be divided into social and sport encounters, research should examine the effects of each on specific journeys, on the overall FJE, and on one another. It may also be possible to identify common FJEs based on trends and other factors such as demographics. Different generations might have different preferences, as Gen Z, for example, has a different access to technology compared to boomers. Female fandom is likely different from male fandom due to structural constraints. An especially interesting segment could be satellite fans, who support teams in foreign countries, mostly through digital means (Uhrich et al., 2023). The emergence of player-dominant fans could be driven by them, since much online content is player-based, and they have no geographical reason to support a specific team. The support through digital means constrains social relationships, which may hinder a strong psychological connection. However, recognizing their value right now can pay off in the long run. Because only recent technological advancements have enabled satellite fandom, many are the first in their families to adopt it, thereby not inheriting it (Miranda et al., 2022). However, they may convey this satellite fandom to future generations. Thus,

acquiring satellite fans at present may be relatively easy and secure fans for generations. Research can also examine whether the concept is applicable to fan experiences with other forms of entertainment (e.g., film or music fans). There are likely multiple core journeys that interact with product extension journeys as well. However, sport fans have unique characteristics that distinguish them from general pop culture fans. Sports fandom is, for example, always competitive and uncertain, and events are perceived as “real” and, as a result, often as significant (e.g., a movie and its outcomes are not real). (Schimmel et al., 2007) Researchers should also give more attention to anti-fan journeys. Obviously, they relate to rivals, but they might also relate to successful teams. When Kevin Durant joined the Golden State Warriors in 2016, who had just set the best regular season record of all-time, his move drew immense backlash. Under the “If you can’t beat’em, join’em” narrative, this was seen as an unnecessary shortcut to a title and was widely perceived to have destroyed the competitive balance of the league. Researchers could also investigate which sports are semantically similar and, thereby, may be easier to integrate. Furthermore, they can inspect which segments of multisport fans exist. Structural factors in fandom should also be further examined, given that structures enable behavior and that organizations should act as enablers. Special attention should be given to structures that constrain female fandom, as these hinder the emergence of a large customer segment. Finally, the FJE may facilitate segmentation into PCM stages based on behavior. It is difficult to assess PCM stages at large scales because fans would have to complete a survey. However, the number and type of journeys a customer is enrolled in, may indicate the stage. During the awareness phase, only a few, weakly interlinked, and most often unintentionally accessed sticky journeys should exist. During the attraction phase, more sticky journeys develop, with free or low-cost product extensions, and first one-off purchases are made. The attachment stage might be characterized by the first committed purchase on a subscription market. Lastly, allegiance should be characterized by a highly complex and dense FJE. Researchers can try to identify commonalities in FJEs depending on the current PCM stage (e.g., an average number of smooth journeys or density metrics), thereby facilitating behavioral segmentation.

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