

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54663/2182-9306.2023.sn13.56-76>

Research Paper

The Importance of Social Identification through Digital Marketing to Cultivate Emotional Attachment towards the Brand: Evidence from the Real Madrid, F.C.

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ABSTRACT

Covid-19 has caused an unprecedented global economic crisis (Maguire, 2021). This pandemic has negatively affected all industries but has especially struck hard in the service sector. One example is based on sports entities, which have faced severe financial difficulties because of the lockdown and restrictions during the “new normal” era. However, Real Madrid FC is the only major European football club that did not suffer economic losses during the years of the pandemic. On the contrary, they continued to be profitable, achieving the distinction of the world’s most valuable soccer team by Forbes in 2022. Furthermore, during this time, they also became the most followed football club on social media and the club with the highest web traffic. Using a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches, this article applies the framework of Social Identity Theory to explore how emotional attachment toward the brand was cultivated during the pandemic through digital marketing.

Keywords: Strategic Marketing; Digital Marketing; Customer Engagement; Sports Brand; Social Identity Theory; Real Madrid, F.C.

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Received on: 2022/12/29

Approved on: 2023/06/14

Evaluated by a double-blind review system

1. INTRODUCTION

A relevant phenomenon for scholars and e-marketers is online communities' increasingly important role among consumers. Such interactive and participatory communication environments stimulate consumer active participation and brand engagement (Wang, 2023). They are also essential in the consumer brand's effective relationship-building processes (Vernuccio et al., 2015).

The importance of digital marketing and customer engagement has been accentuated within the Covid-19 scenario. Specifically, aside from the health and humanitarian crisis, the pandemic caused an acute economic downturn in most sectors, forcing organizations – especially those operating in the service sector - to stretch beyond existing business strategies (Heinonen & Strandvik, 2021). We can then argue that the Covid-19 crisis has highlighted the primacy of customers and the recognition that successful marketing strategies are only built on understanding customers (Byon & Phua, 2021).

As an unprecedented event, the Covid-19 crisis could only be compared with the global economic crisis of 2007 and 2008, which shattered financial markets and plunged Western economies into recession. During the 2007-2008 crisis, finding an industry unaffected by the cascading failures of banks across America and Europe was extremely difficult. Yet there was one: the sports industry (Parnell et al., 2020). However, despite being one of the most robust economic sectors of the global economy (Ratten, 2020), the sports sector has been significantly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, as almost all live sporting events were canceled or suspended during the early months of the crisis. As such, sports organizations were forced to operate with restrictive measures, such as social distancing. All this negatively affected the financial viability of most teams due to the loss of income from ticket sales, sponsorships, and broadcasts (Beiderbeck et al., 2021), in some cases representing millions in losses. The potential maximum revenue loss for the 2019/2020 season is estimated at €4.14 billion, with lost broadcasting revenue from Europe's top 5 football teams accounting for over half of that (Parnell et al, 2020).

However, Real Madrid FC is the only major European football club able to close the 2019/20 season profitably (0.3 million euros). Furthermore, the club announced an after-tax profit of 874,000 euros at the close of the 2020/21 season, making it one of the few

large clubs in Europe that did not incur losses during the pandemic. This is a very relevant aspect as the operating losses accumulated by European clubs in the seasons 2019/20 and 2020/21 approached € 6 billion (Baker, 2021). Moreover, Real Madrid F.C. strengthened its ties with fans during the Covid-19 crisis and became the most followed football club on social networks (Deloitte, 2021) and with the highest website traffic (ConScore, 2021).

A growing body of research focuses on consumers' emotional attachment to a brand. However, the literature has not recently emphasized the understanding of the “love” people can profess toward a brand (Roberts, 2004; Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012). Shimp & Madden (1988) were the first authors to identify the feeling of "love" in a marketing context. Later, Carroll & Ahuvia (2006) proposed a scale for measuring a consumer's love toward a brand. In line with the above arguments, emotional attachment towards the brand is currently emerging as a central outcome in brand management, representing a means of building stronger consumer-brand relationships, resistance to negative information (Vernuccio et al., 2015), and increased willingness on the part of consumers to pay a higher price for “loved” brands (Mittal, Gupta & Mottiani, 2022). Brand advocates also tend to enjoy being members of the fan community (Burnasheva, Suh, and Villalobos-Moron, 2019), thus helping to defend the brand from criticism (Viera & Sousa, 2020) and create a unique sense in customers who avoid buying and using competitor brands (Valmohammadi et al., 2023).

This work explores how Real Madrid's marketing strategy influenced the emotional bond their followers profess towards the team. Specifically, the article examines how the club used its website, social networks, and mobile marketing during the pandemic to generate emotional attachment toward the brand. The fact that it is one of the few entities that could stay profitable in a context where the rest suffered losses justifies the current study. To achieve this goal, the researchers apply the framework of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel 1978) as it has been widely applied to study fan identification (Hishon, 2020). These will be our contributions.

This paper is structured as follows. The first section is a brief literature review in which social identity theory is discussed in the context of the marketing literature. Based on this theoretical foundation, the research hypotheses are developed. The research methodology section then describes how the quantitative and qualitative research was conducted. Next, the results are discussed. Finally, implications for research and marketers are discussed, as well as the limitations and further research avenues.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Social Identity theory provides an adequate framework for explaining intergroup behavior and communication (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) based on humans' inherent value on social group memberships (Burnasheva, Suh, & Villalobos-Moron, 2019).

This theory postulates that an individual's identity is formed as a means of self-comparison based on group affiliation (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). That is when a person claims to be a member of a group, the group to which (s)he belongs is seen as being different from the others, and members of the same group as being more similar than they are (Hirshon, 2020).

Based on the above discussion, Social Identity Theory helps understand people's interaction in a social network as they go beyond their identity to develop a social identity (Gumparthy & Patra, 2019). It is also considered a reliable framework for understanding individuals' commitment (Mittal, Gupta, & Mottiani, 2022).

Particularly, when a supporter identifies closely with a brand, a sense of connectedness ensues (Baena, 2018). They begin to define themselves with the company (Mael and Ashforth, 1992) and experience its successes and failures as their own (Hirshon, 2020), which in turn, drives a greater sense of belonging to a community (Valmohammadi et al., 2023), and a strong feeling of identification and commitment (Vernuccio et al., 2015). In this way, fans can develop a strong attachment to the brand (Harwood, 2020).

The need to analyze the love that customers may profess towards a brand through the Social Identity Theory has been emphasized in recent literature (Burnasheva, Suh, & Villalobos-Moron 2019), as this framework helps understand the interaction of people in a social network (Hirshon, 2020). We follow this recommendation, and the present research uses this theoretical approach to infer the role of social identification through online media (website and social networks) and mobile marketing as drivers of emotional attachment toward the brand.

2.1 Building fan engagement through the website and social network engagement

The literature has highlighted the importance of relationship-building in branding. Such efforts may result in very high levels of engagement (Vernuccio et al., 2015) and differentiate a company's brand from competitors' brands (Heinonen & Strandvik, 2021). Therefore, interest in understanding the drivers of emotional attachment toward a brand is

accelerating as research shows its managerial relevance (Ahuvia, Izberk-Bilgin, & Lee, 2022).

With the advancement of digital technologies, new platforms have been created for consumers to share information and express themselves (Burnasheva, Suh, & Villalobos-Moron, 2019). The Internet and, more specifically, online network-based communities offer a context where individuals can address their “need to belong” and satisfy social needs by sharing brand-related experiences. These platforms can also provide new opportunities for consumer identity construction, where customers meet and share their experiences and passion concerning their beloved brands (Vale & Fernandes, 2018).

Online communities also allow followers to express personal ideas, become brand advocates, actively interact with other followers, and deepen their emotional attachment to the brand (Lawrence & Crawford, 2021). Said differently, consumers’ love for brands will increase if they relate with other consumers. In particular, Vernuccio et al. (2015) showed this to be the case on Facebook fan pages for brands including Coke, MTV, Disney, and Starbucks. Users who participated in conversations on various topics and socialized with other fans came to have a strong sense of belonging to the fan community (Valmohammadi et al., 2023), which in turn led to increased love for the brand (Ahuvia, Izberk-Bilgin & Lee, 2022).

In other words, using company websites and social networks provides an instant and simple way to create connections between brands and their followers (Hirshon, 2020), leading to social identity development (Mittal, Gupta, & Mottiani, 2022). Based on this theoretical framework, we propose the following research hypotheses:

H₁: Social identification through a company’s social networks positively relates to emotional attachment toward the brand.

H₂: Social identification through a company’s website positively relates to emotional attachment toward the brand.

2.2 Building fan engagement through mobile marketing

The commercialization of smartphones has made it possible to contact and interact with brand followers so that the geographical distance of the message's recipients is no longer a problem (Hayes, 2020).

Traditionally, mobile marketing was limited to sending promotional messages by the company to a person through channels such as SMS (Wais & Clemons, 2008). Before Apple introduced the iPhone in 2007, SMS or similar notification services were the only

mobile marketing tools. However, after the appearance of smartphones, the situation changed, and the current number of people that own a smart feature phone is 7.26 billion, making up 91.54% of the world's population. (Bankmycell, 2022). This fact highlights the importance of mobile marketing as one of the most promising communication tools (Westmattelmann et al., 2020).

The current scenario has given rise to a new concept, according to which the mobile phone has become a unique and powerful platform for a wide range of communication and information access applications (Vale & Fernandes, 2018). In other words, followers like to build brand-consumer relationships and be active in creating their own experiences rather than just being passive bystanders (Mastromartino et al., 2020). To achieve this goal, mobile marketing makes it easy for fans to keep up with the latest news from their favorite brand by receiving text messages, videos, images, and all kinds of applications (Baena, 2016) and interact with other brand followers through the company's app (Hazzam, 2022). Accordingly, it can be said that mobile marketing allows fans to experience a sense of proximity, trust, and social belonging toward the brand (Harwood, 2020). These attributes, as indicated by Social Identity Theory, have a positive impact on affective bonding. Therefore, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H₃: Social identification through a company's app (mobile marketing) is positively related to emotional attachment toward the brand.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Eligibility of Real Madrid F.C.

From a sports perspective, Real Madrid is one of the most successful football clubs in the world. Since it was founded in 1902, Real Madrid has won 35 "La Liga" titles (national league trophies), 19 "Copas del Rey" (Spain's national cup), 14 European Champions League trophies, 3 Intercontinental Cups, and 5 FIFA Club World Cup, among others. Due to these exceptional titles, FIFA named it the Best Club of the 20th Century. Real Madrid FC can also wear a multiple-winner badge on their jersey during UEFA Champions League matches, as the club has won more than five European Cups. More recently, the team received the *FIFA Order of Merit*. It was also recognized as the *Best Sports Institution* in 2019 at the New York Summit Gala, which promotes and recognizes people, organizations, and companies that work to improve the world through the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

The club epitomizes the importance of branding and has developed the ability to market in a way not seen anywhere else in football. As a result, it is the most-followed football club on social media (Deloitte, 2021), the first on the planet to surpass 100 million followers on Facebook and Instagram, with 113 and 140 million followers, respectively (level 02.06.2023). Another number that exemplifies the power of Real Madrid on social networks is illustrated by the fact that Kylian Mbappe (PSG's football player) lost 700,000 Instagram followers immediately after rejecting Real Madrid's offer to join the team (data captured 24.05.2022).

Regarding brand value, for the second consecutive year, Real Madrid F. C. is the most valuable football club in the world with a value of 6.070 billion dollars, according to The World's Most Valuable Soccer Teams 2023, elaborated by Forbes. Specifically, the team is valued at \$6.07 billion. Real Madrid FC is followed by Manchester United F. C. (\$6 billion) and Barcelona (\$5.510 billion) in the standings. Therefore, Real Madrid F. C. is worth more than any team, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Top 10 Most Valuable Football Clubs 2023

POSITION	CLUB	VALUE (\$B)
1	Real Madrid	6.070
2	Manchester United	6.000
3	Barcelona	5.510
4	Liverpool	5.290
5	Manchester City	4.990
6	Bayern Munich	4.860
7	PSG	4.210
8	Chelsea	3.100
9	Tottenham	2.800

Source: Own elaboration based on Forbes (2023)

Nevertheless, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted football teams' inherent financial and governance weaknesses. Real Madrid FC is not an exception, and as stated in its *Annual Report 2019-2020*, the pandemic resulted in a reduction in revenue of 13% (€-106 million). Thanks to the strategies implemented by the team to mitigate the impact of the Covid-19 crisis, Real Madrid F.C. ended 2019/20 near break-even. In comparison, its closest rival (FC Barcelona) lost €100 million at the end of that session. Furthermore, the club announced an after-tax profit of 874,000 euros at the close of the 2020-21

season, making it one of the few large clubs in Europe that did not incur losses in those two years. In 2022, Real Madrid FC (brand value up 19% to €1.5 billion) achieved a rare double by winning its title as the world's most valuable football club and strongest football brand (Brand Finance Football 50 2022 Report). In sum, as Javier Tebas, - president of the Spanish Football Association-, stated, “Among *the biggest European football clubs, Real Madrid FC is the one that best dealt with the Covid-19 crisis*” (Gutiérrez, 2021).

The combination of the factors above made Real Madrid FC the appropriate brand for this study, as it represents a leading organization in sports, business, and marketing.

3.2 Data gathering process

The work combines quantitative (survey and econometric analysis) and qualitative (focus group) approaches.

An online survey was created and administered on the platform www.surveymonkey.com, an independent third-party program specializing in creating and managing online surveys. It is worth mentioning that online data collection was utilized as a cost-effective method of reaching a large-scale sample in a broad geographic region (Bauer, Sauer, and Schmitt, 2005). Furthermore, an online survey would reach people navigating social media platforms and company websites. The questionnaire was made available from September to December 2020. Participation was initially solicited among supporters of Real Madrid on fan sites, where a direct link to the survey was provided. Snowball sampling was used to obtain additional participants, whereby a link to the online survey was emailed to participants, who were invited to forward it to their contacts. This produced a total of 368 completed questionnaires. Most respondents were Spanish (92%), men (73%), and aged between 18 and 35 years (64%). In the study of Carroll & Ahuvia (2006), respondents were first asked to name a brand they were satisfied with. This example was followed, and as the present survey was based on the Real Madrid brand, respondents had first to state if they would consider themselves Real Madrid fans. Only those who affirmatively identified as fans of Real Madrid were invited to complete the survey. As all the questions were configured as mandatory to move on to the next question, the missing values were acceptable in this study.

Given that the authors used a structured questionnaire, the respondents needed the opportunity to justify their answers, which limited the interpretation of some data.

Therefore, a qualitative research approach was applied to develop a more detailed analysis. Specifically, a focus group was carried out in early 2021 to gain insight into the club as well as the effectiveness of its marketing strategy in times of Covid-19.

Participation was solicited among the academic staff and undergraduate students from the authors' university who affirmatively identified as fans of Real Madrid FC. The students were between 21 and 46 years, with a mean age of 34. The focus group session was recorded and took about 70 minutes. Specific questions were posed by the researchers but without limiting the topics so that respondents could raise questions and issues not previously considered by the authors. The findings of this focus group helped to understand better the results obtained in the econometric analysis.

3.3 Measurement of variables

As shown in Table 2, to assess the emotional attachment towards the brand (ATTACHMENT), Carroll & Ahuvia's (2006) research was considered. To adapt these items to sports, the term "brand" was replaced by "club" to clarify the context for the respondents.

Table 2. Dependent variable operationalization adapted from Carroll and Ahuvia (2006)

<i>Attachment – ten items, Likert-type scale consisting of the five points from strongly disagree to strongly agree.</i>
This is a wonderful club.
This club makes me feel good.
This club is totally awesome.
I have neutral feelings about this club.
This club makes me very happy.
I love this club.
I have no particular feelings about this club.
This club is pure delight.
I am passionate about this club.
I'm very attached to this club.

Concerning the independent variables, the survey was split into different online and mobile marketing channels. The first channel was the official website of Real Madrid. The second, for social media marketing, the chosen platforms were Facebook and Instagram, representing over 80% of the documents shared about Real Madrid on social networks. To measure the Facebook construct, the item "How often do you share posts of Real Madrid on your wall?" was added to the operationalization proposed in

Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen's (2010) study, as it represents a common habit in the social media platform. A similar item was added to the Instagram construct by replacing the word "share" with "regram", as shown in Table 3. This table also shows the items used to assess the mobile marketing construct.

Table 3. Independent variable operationalization adapted from Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen (2010)

Website – <i>four items, four points each</i>
To what extent do you follow news about Real Madrid on the website? ^a
How often do you visit the Real Madrid website? ^b
How often do you talk about the Real Madrid website to others? ^b
Would you be interested in buying merchandise with the Real Madrid name on it through the website? ^b
Facebook – <i>five items, four points each</i>
To what extent do you follow news about Real Madrid on Facebook? ^a
How often do you visit the Real Madrid Facebook page? ^b
How often do you talk about the Real Madrid Facebook page to others? ^b
How often do you share posts of the Real Madrid Facebook page on your wall? ^b
Would you be interested in buying merchandise with the Real Madrid name on it through Facebook? ^b
Instagram – <i>five items, four points each</i>
To what extent do you follow news about Real Madrid through Instagram? ^a
How often do you visit the Real Madrid Instagram profile? ^b
How often do you talk about the Real Madrid Instagram profile to others? ^b
How often do you "regram" posts of the Real Madrid Instagram profile? ^b
Would you be interested in buying merchandise with the Real Madrid name on it through Instagram? ^b

Mobile – six items
Do you use the Real Madrid SMS/MMS notification service? ^c
Do you have the Real Madrid app ‘MyMadrid’? ^c
How often do you use the ‘MyMadrid’ app? ^d
How often do you talk about the ‘MyMadrid’ app to others? ^b
How often did you recommend the ‘MyMadrid’ app to others? ^c
Would you be interested in buying merchandise with the Real Madrid name on it through the ‘MyMadrid’ app? ^b
Do you use any of the following Real Madrid apps? ^f

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Structural equation results

As shown in Table 4, Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was calculated for each of the obtained factors to test the survey’s reliability. Values ranged from 0.76 to 0.90, thus suggesting internal consistency. This fact confirmed the composite reliability values well above the suggested level of 0.70 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Convergent validity was not a problem, as the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) coefficients were above .50, as required.

Table 4. Reliability Analysis

Dependent Variable: Attachment	Cronbach’s Alfa	AVE	Composite Reliability
Attachment 1	.787	.591	.979
Attachment 2			
Attachment 3			
Attachment 4			
Attachment 5			
Attachment 6			
Attachment 7			
Attachment 8			
Attachment 9			
Attachment 10			

^a Answer scale: 1 = not at all; 2 = slightly; 3 = quite; 4 = extremely.

^b Answer scale: 1 = never; 2 = sometimes; 3 = usually; 4 = always.

^c Answer choice: 1 = yes; 2 = no.

^d Answer scale: 1 = never; 2 = sometimes; 3 = usually; 4 = daily.

^e Answer scale: 1 = 0; 2 = 1; 3 = 1-10; 4 = positively10.

^f Answer scale: 1= Journey to Real Madrid; 2= Real Madrid Starscup; 3= Real Madrid Fanatasy Manager; 4= Real Madrid Talking Players; 5= none.

	Cronbach's Alfa	AVE	Composite Reliability
Independent Variable Facebook			
Facebook1 Facebook2 Facebook3 Facebook4 Facebook5 Facebook6	.862	.704	.968

	Cronbach's Alfa	AVE	Composite Reliability
Independent Variable: Instagram			
Instagram1 Instagram2 Instagram3 Instagram4 Instagram5	.911	.784	.966

	Cronbach's Alfa	AVE	Composite Reliability
Independent Variable: Website			
Web1 Web2 Web3 Web4	.854	.628	.911

	Cronbach's Alfa	AVE	Composite Reliability
Independent Variable: Mobile			
Mobile1 Mobile 2 Mobile 3 Mobile 4 Mobile 5 Mobile 6 Mobile 7	.712	.561	.974

Principal component analysis was used as a dimensionality-reduction method to simplify the items of the different variables into single values. A confirmatory factor analysis was also conducted to verify the factor structure. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual model and SEM analysis.

Subsequently, structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis was used to test the research hypotheses. The structural model values are summarized in Table 5.

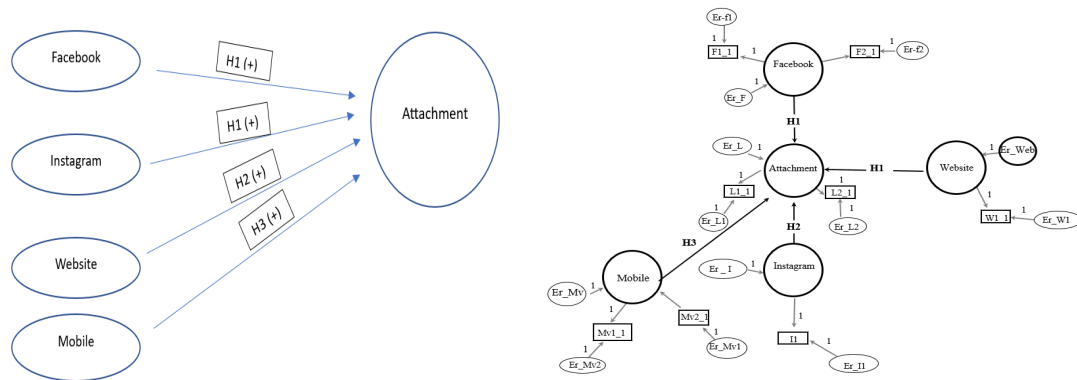


Figure 1. Conceptual Model and SEM Analysis

Table 5. Structural Model Values

Fit index	Value	Recommended cut-off values
P-value	.001	< .05
$\chi^2/d.f.$	3.15	< 5
SRMR	.069	< .08
AGFI	.814	> .80
RMSEA	.074	< .08
NFI	.929	> .90
TLI	.951	> .90
CFI	.961	> .95
GFI	.801	> .50
PNFI	.689	> .50
PCFI	.742	> .50

As shown in Table 6, our findings reveal a positive and statistically significant association between the use of social networks (FACEBOOK & INSTAGRAM) with the emotional attachment to the brand (ATTACHMENT). Social identification through a company's website (WEBSITE) also positively affected the emotional ties between the club and its followers.

Therefore, hypotheses H1 and H2 were supported at the 0.05 level. Conversely, H3 could not be supported since the association between the team's mobile marketing (MOBILE) actions and the love supporters professed towards the club was found to be positive but not statistically significant.

Table 6. Structural Model Coefficients

Hypotheses and Pathways			β estimates	p-value
H1 (+)	Facebook	→ Attachment	.580	.022
H2 (+)	Website	→ Attachment	.234	.031
H1 (+)	Instagram	→ Attachment	.285	.002
H3 (+)	Mobile	→ Attachment	.374	.112

4.2 Qualitative analysis

Participants in the focus group remarked on the active digital presence of the club and its players during the pandemic. Not in vain, during confinement, Real Madrid FC reached more than 4.7 billion video views and experienced a 60% increase on Instagram (Real Madrid, 2020), consolidating its leadership position on the main social networks (Deloitte, 2021). In addition, Realmadrid.com (the team's official website) became the most visited football club website in the world, according to data from comScore. Specifically, during the 2019-2020 season, it received 71 million visits. Connections from mobile devices accounted for 76% of total traffic (Real Madrid, 2020).

“Being a fan of Real Madrid FC is something you subconsciously build around your daily routine. You find yourself on Facebook or Instagram reading opinions, check out the starting lineup and share your opinions with other people on the Internet who have become friends, and sit back and watch your idols. During the lockdown, I am genuinely grateful because the team has not only given me something to look forward to throughout these weeks and months on the web and RealMadrid TV but also taught me a lot. It has allowed me to meet other fans worldwide and interact with my idols through social media 24h a day. Without Real Madrid, I’m not sure what I would be doing with my time,” one of the participants said.

The discussion group participants pointed out that being informed of the charitable initiatives carried out by Real Madrid FC during the pandemic also contributed to increasing the affective ties between themselves and the club. Specifically, -the Santander Challenge League, -a virtual tournament for charitable purposes organized by the Spanish Soccer League that took place in March 2020-, was very positively valued by the discussion group members. Real Madrid FC won the competition and proudly shared this award with their fans, uploading videos with summaries and complete matches on YouTube. The entire competition was also broadcast live on Twitch. The

proceeds from the tournament - €180,000 - were donated to medical staff fighting Covid-19. Based on the success of this charity competition, Real Madrid FC launched another event called “Real Madrid Playground,”; a space where content based on the FIFA20 game was generated. In this case, the team's players competed in various FIFA matches against other teammates and famous athletes, such as Formula One driver Carlos Sainz.

After canceling live sports events due to mandatory confinement, Real Madrid F.C. allowed its fans to be creative and become journalists for one day a week on Twitter through an initiative they named “Ask the Players.” Supporters had the opportunity to prepare questions and send them to the club. Each week, new players responded, and the club subsequently shared the videos on social media. The strategy was well received, and the team received questions from fans worldwide, reaching more than 5 million followers.

In addition, the Real Madrid Foundation organized various charity auctions during the lockdown. The club’s supporters were able to bid on different items, such as their favorite players’ shirts. It is also worth mentioning that Real Madrid F.C., in collaboration with the Higher Sports Council, launched a project for the supply and distribution of strategic medical supplies in the fight against the pandemic. Thanks to the close collaboration of these two institutions, the club loaned their arena, the Santiago Bernabéu stadium, for storage of medical supplies donated to fight against the pandemic. The Real Madrid Foundation also donated 3,600,000 euros to alleviate the effects of the pandemic. The team's followers highly applauded these initiatives on the web and social networks. This helped them increase their commitment and identification with Real Madrid FC.

“The team constantly supported society to fight against Covid-19. A message that must be conveyed to the entire society. Real Madrid supporters must feel proud of the team”, one of the focus group’s participants stated.



Figure 2. Examples of actions developed by Real Madrid F.C. during the pandemic are highlighted in the Focus Group.
Source: Own elaboration based on Real Madrid's Website and Social Networks

5. CONCLUSIONS

All sectors of activity were affected by Covid-19, but physical restrictions significantly damaged service companies. Football teams may serve as an example, with games canceled for the first time since World War II. However, Real Madrid FC is the only major European football club able to close the 2019/20 season profitably (0.3 million euros) and present a positive result of 874,000 euros at the end of the 2020/21 season. These figures demonstrate that the club could adapt to and successfully tackle the economic crisis caused by the pandemic.

This study attempts to contribute by providing researchers and managers with an in-depth description of the marketing strategies used by Real Madrid F.C. during the pandemic to deal

with and overcome the Covid-19 crisis. To achieve this goal, through the lens of Social Identity Theory, this manuscript explores the role of digital marketing in enhancing fan engagement. This represents an essential academic contribution because a research gap exists in the literature exploring the linkage between Social Identity Theory and crisis management (Ratten, 2020). Therefore, to extend the understanding of this theory and its applications, our results focus on the Covid-19 crisis and illustrate that using digital marketing to facilitate social identification may build emotional attachment toward the brand.

Besides, the present manuscript highlights the efforts made by Real Madrid F.C. to ensure maximum visibility and increase emotional bonding with its followers during the pandemic. As a result, the team consolidated itself as the most followed football club on social networks (Deloitte, 2021) and Realmadrid.com -the team's official website-as, the world's most visited football club website. Our findings align with the postulates of Social Identity Theory and confirm that using the website and social media to tap into emotional attachment represents an effective strategy for the team during the lockdown. This strategy is essential in times of physical restrictions, as it provides an instantaneous and easy way to create connections between sports clubs and their followers (Lawrence & Crawford, 2021).

Regarding mobile marketing, the results show that this tool may contribute to the effective bond with the brand. However, unlike using the web and social networks, this relationship was not statistically significant. Notwithstanding, it should be noted that the literature has shown that mobile marketing can generate adverse reactions, such as irritation (Li, Edwards & Lee, 2002) if the message's recipient considers these actions to be a type of intrusive communication (Baena, 2016). To provide a better understanding of this issue, the authors proceeded to analyze the comments and ratings received by the official Real Madrid F.C. app by its users. Most of the negative comments about the team's app were related to the difficulty of selectively turning off notifications. By default, all notifications were activated, and in the opinion of the users, they represented too much spam. We hope, therefore, that the results obtained in this study confirm the importance of understanding and respecting the personal nature of the use of mobile phones.

Likewise, our study attempts to provide various practical implications. Firstly, we hope our results may serve sports managers as a guide for their future business plans in the "new normal" scenario. Specifically, service companies wishing to survive must understand the need to adopt

new strategies to contact clients and interact with them in a way that is no longer restricted to physical presence (Wang, 2023). For all of them, this study can aid in elaborating an efficient marketing plan in a global market where customer relationships are paramount.

Furthermore, sponsorship is one of the largest revenue sources for sports teams (Baena, 2019; Byron & Phua, 2021). Even though games behind closed doors and capacity restrictions could have negatively affected the club's sponsors, Real Madrid F.C. minimized the effect of the pandemic by using digital media to increase brand awareness of the sponsors' brands and bring fans and club sponsors closer together. For instance, Real Madrid F.C. used their social networks to inform their followers during the worst months of the pandemic of the charitable initiatives launched by the sponsors. As a result, despite the lockdown, the club was able to ensure their sponsors' digital presence at levels comparable to the results achieved under regular football playing conditions in prior seasons (Real Madrid, 2020). This allowed the team to sign new collaboration agreements and renew existing ones, which saved the team from going into the red -as was the case with most of the European elite sports teams during the Covid-19 pandemic-. In short, our findings confirm that sports entities must be managed as an enterprise, representing an important practical lesson for sports managers.

Limitations and Further Research Avenues

While this study offers valuable theoretical and practical implications, it is not free from limitations. Firstly, even though Real Madrid F.C. offers an exemplary model, it would be interesting to carry out comparative studies of companies in other sectors of activity (i.e., tourism, hospitality, etc.) that were also capable of successfully managing the restrictions caused by the pandemic.

Besides, it would be helpful to verify if the results obtained in this study could be extrapolated to any business or if, on the contrary, some differences must be addressed and explained in future research.

Finally, the data used in this study was obtained by an online survey method. Similar to the other online surveys, this study uses a convenience sample, which could be improved because it only includes people willing to participate.

Acknowledgments: The authors acknowledge Real Madrid F.C. for its time and support in elaborating this study.

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How to cite this article:

Baena, V. (2023). The Importance of Social Identification through Digital Marketing to Cultivate Emotional Attachment towards the Brand: Evidence from the Real Madrid, F.C., *International Journal of Marketing, Communication and New Media*, Special Issue on Services Marketing, June 2023, 56-76.