Research Paper

Exploring Tribal Fan Behavior and Digital Marketing in Sports Crises

Ana Lima *

Lia Soares **

ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore how digital marketing strategies contribute to sustaining and reinforcing tribal consumption behaviors among sports fans during times of organizational crisis. However, while the literature has extensively explored fan engagement and brand communities in stable conditions, there remains a significant gap in understanding how digital strategies function as emotional and symbolic tools during periods of organizational instability. This research aims to study the influence of digital marketing strategies in the context of a sports crisis, as promoters of tribal consumption, using a single case study. Most studies focus on stable conditions or general crisis communication, overlooking the intersection of tribalism and digital engagement in turbulent contexts. A single case study was adopted, based on qualitative methods, through a netnographic analysis, and quantitative methods, using a questionnaire focused on a sample of 309 supporters, fans, and/or members of a football club. The findings indicate that, despite the digital affordances that support tribal behavior, such as online interaction and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), the effects of a crisis often overshadow the intended outcomes of digital marketing strategies, as perceived by both practitioners and consumers. The study demonstrates that while tribal fan behavior endures during periods of crisis, its manifestation transitions from overt engagement to more symbolic forms of loyalty and passive content consumption. Crises not only reshape fan perceptions but also transform their modes of interaction with digital platforms and brand communications. Although digital marketing can help maintain emotional continuity, it is insufficient to counterbalance the disillusionment caused by poor performance. These findings underscore that fan communities function as emotionally driven tribes, necessitating marketing strategies that are responsive to emotional fluctuations rather than attempting to override them.

Keywords: Tribal Marketing; Fan Behavior; Digital Marketing; Sport Crisis; Football Club

_____

* CEOS, ISCAP, Polytechnic of Porto, Portugal. E-mail: analima@iscap.ipp.pt
** ISCAP, Polytechnic of Porto, Portugal. E-mail: 2181199@iscap.ipp.pt

1. INTRODUCTION

The rise of social media and digital platforms has transformed traditional fan interactions into dynamic, participatory experiences. Within this context, football fandom exemplifies a form of modern tribalism where emotional loyalty, symbolic rituals, and shared identity form the core of community behavior. This tribal dimension becomes particularly salient during times of organizational crisis, when the emotional bond between fans and clubs is tested. In the contemporary digital era, the relationship between organizations and their audiences has undergone a profound transformation. The proliferation of digital technologies and social media platforms has redefined marketing communication, enabling more interactive, personalized, and emotionally resonant engagements between brands and consumers (Kim et al., 2021). Within the realm of sports, this shift has been particularly impactful, as fans increasingly participate in digital communities that extend their identification with teams beyond the physical boundaries of stadiums and matchdays (Campos, 2019).

In recent years, there have been revolutions in the way organizations relate to their target audience. According to Kim et al. (2021), new technologies enable new processes in Marketing communication, which, in turn, generate value through new experiences and interactions with consumers in the digital environment. Thus, we are witnessing a gradual increase in bidirectional and homogeneous connections, where the consumer is closer and able to interact (Campos, 2019).

The tendency to form groups is inevitable, where individuals develop a feeling of family unity or identity alliance, where they express a sense of belonging and protection in favor of a group (Knijnik & Newson, 2020). Fans express their pride in their favorite sports teams through a variety of behaviors. They celebrate both past and present achievements, wear the team's colors and logo with pride—especially on game days and engage in ritualistic traditions that they closely associate with their identity as supporters (Yoshida, 2024). Among sports fans, particularly in football, the phenomenon of tribalism has emerged as a powerful framework for understanding consumer behavior. Tribalism refers to the deep emotional and symbolic loyalty that fans develop toward their teams, often manifesting in ritualistic behaviors, symbolic affiliations, and a strong sense of collective identity (Knijnik & Newson, 2020; Yoshida, 2024). These tribal affiliations are not only expressions of support but also serve as mechanisms for social belonging and identity construction. In times of organizational crisis, such as

poor performance, financial instability, or leadership controversies, this tribal loyalty becomes a critical asset, sustaining fan engagement and mitigating reputational damage (Smith et al., 2017).

Tribalism in football refers to the profound sense of loyalty and identification that fans develop toward their teams. This allegiance is not only emotional but also behavioral, influencing how supporters respond to both triumph and adversity. In times of organizational crisis, such as leadership scandals, poor performance, or financial instability, this tribal loyalty becomes a crucial asset (Smith et al., 2017). Crisis communication, in this context, plays a key role in shaping narratives, managing reputational damage, and preserving the emotional connection between the club and its fan base. A strategic and transparent communication approach helps maintain trust and mitigates the potential erosion of supporter engagement (Lim & Brown-Devlin, 2021).

Digital strategies grounded in technological tools, social media platforms, and data analytics amplify the effectiveness of crisis communication by enabling real-time interaction and personalized messaging. These digital tools are essential for sustaining tribal connections, particularly when uncertainty threatens to destabilize fan loyalty. By leveraging digital channels, sports organizations can not only disseminate information quickly but also reinforce a sense of community, belonging, and shared identity among fans, thus enhancing their resilience during periods of crisis. The rise of social media and other digital platforms has transformed crisis communication, and organizations must adapt to these channels to engage with stakeholders quickly and effectively (Pöppel, 2024). Digital marketing strategies play a pivotal role by leveraging the affordances of social media, data analytics, and real-time communication, sports organizations can reinforce tribal connections and maintain emotional continuity with their fan base. These strategies are particularly vital during crises, when traditional forms of engagement may falter and fans seek reassurance, solidarity, and reaffirmation of their identity through digital channels (Lim & Brown-Devlin, 2021; Pöppel, 2024).

While existing literature has extensively explored fan engagement, brand communities, and the role of digital marketing in sports (Dass et al., 2021; Lou et al., 2021; Ratten & Thompson, 2021), there is limited research on how tribalism understood as the emotional and symbolic loyalty of fans is sustained through digital strategies in times of organizational crisis. Most studies focus either on crisis communication or on fan behavior in stable conditions (Harker, 2021), often neglecting the intersection between these dimensions during moments of reputational or structural instability. Consequently, there is a lack of understanding of how football clubs can strategically use digital tools not only to manage crises but also to reinforce tribal connections and maintain fan loyalty in uncertain contexts. This study seeks to address that gap by examining the case of a football club facing a crisis and analyzing how digital communication strategies influence and preserve tribal consumption behaviors. While digital

marketing and engagement strategies are well-documented (Muharam, 2024), their specific impact and effectiveness during crises are not thoroughly examined. This includes how digital platforms can be used to manage fan expectations, mitigate negative sentiments, and reinforce tribal connections during challenging times.

Addressing this gap is vital for football clubs to develop robust strategies that not only enhance fan engagement and loyalty but also effectively manage crises. By understanding the specific behaviors and needs of their tribal fan base during crises, clubs can implement more effective digital strategies and communication plans. This will help maintain strong fan connections, mitigate the impact of crises, and ensure long-term support and loyalty. This study seeks to address this gap by examining how digital marketing strategies contribute to sustaining tribal consumption behaviors among football fans during times of crisis. Focusing on a single case study Sporting Club of Portugal (SCP).

The purpose of this study is to investigate how digital marketing strategies are employed to sustain tribal consumption behaviors among football fans during times of organizational crisis. By focusing on the case of a professional football club, the research aims to understand the strategic role of digital communication in maintaining emotional bonds, loyalty, and community identity among supporters. In the current era of hyper-connectivity and digital transformation, sports organizations face increasing pressure to maintain strong relationships with their fan base, particularly during periods of crisis that threaten institutional credibility and emotional loyalty. Understanding how tribalism operates in these moments and how digital strategies can effectively sustain it is critical for both academic inquiry and practical application.

This study is significant because it addresses a gap in the literature by linking tribal consumer behavior with crisis communication and digital strategy within the sports industry, a relationship that remains deeply underexplored. The insights generated can help clubs and sports marketers design more resilient, emotionally intelligent communication approaches that preserve community identity and fan loyalty even in the face of adversity. Moreover, it offers a valuable contribution to the broader fields of marketing, communication, and sport management by revealing how emotional and symbolic ties can be leveraged through digital platforms to ensure long-term brand sustainability. The main research question of this study is: How do digital marketing strategies contribute to sustaining tribal consumer behavior among football fans during times of organizational crisis? To address the research question, this study adopts a case study approach, focusing on a single football club as the unit of analysis. The research combines netnography and a questionnaire to explore both the digital communication strategies employed by the club and the perceptions and behaviors of its fan community during a period of organizational crisis.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital marketing strategies play a crucial role in sustaining and reinforcing tribal consumption behaviors among sports fans, especially during organizational crises. By leveraging technology and data analysis, sports organizations can enhance fan engagement and loyalty, which are vital for maintaining tribal connections (Muharam et al., 2024).

The rise of digital marketing is closely tied to the widespread use of social media as the primary source of information about products and services. Modern consumers spend a significant amount of time on these platforms, making them essential channels for promotion and interaction beyond mere purchasing. This includes the co-creation of ideas, gathering preferences, and utilizing buzz marketing to generate recognition and loyalty (Dašić et al., 2023). As a result, integrating a Digital Marketing strategy into an organization's overall plan has become a necessity rather than an option for achieving sustainable and successful long-term results. Since the 1990s, when the internet became popular, Digital Marketing has established itself as a complementary approach to Traditional Marketing, enabling companies to better understand consumer behavior and adapt their strategies as needed (Mohamud & Alkhayyat, 2022).

The digital advertising and marketing market has grown exponentially, reaching a value of $350 billion in 2020 and is projected to reach $786.2 billion by 2026 (Marino, 2023). The pandemic has further accelerated digital adoption, ensuring that the sector's growth will remain robust in the coming years. Digital transformation has also created a new environment for social interaction, requiring marketing strategies to adapt to the demands of modern consumers (Nuseir et al., 2023). In this new paradigm, companies have focused on carefully managing customer relationships, placing customers at the center of their strategies, and understanding their pain points, needs, and preferences to offer more personalized experiences.

Social media facilitates more frequent, rapid, and enriching interactions between consumers and brands, forming online brand communities that are crucial for building lasting and solid relationships. Social media platforms are digital spaces where users with similar interests gather and share written, visual, or audiovisual content (Zuckerman et al., 2021). They also serve as tools for communication, sharing, and relationship building for businesses. These platforms enable engagement, reflecting consumers' positive attitudes towards both the community and the brand (Dessart, 2017). By facilitating two-way communication, social media allows consumers to interact directly with brands, fostering a more emotional and enduring bond (Fetais et al., 2022). Wakefield (2007) notes that when a fan forms an intense psychological connection with a team, surpassing mere loyalty, a process of identification takes place. This identification transforms the fan's relationship with the club, creating

an emotional bond that can be leveraged by digital marketing strategies. Sport possesses a unique power to unite people and foster a sense of community, as collective experiences of victories and defeats create strong emotional bonds (Writer & Storyteller, 2024).

2.1 Tribalism and tribal elements

Tribal marketing is the result of engagement and the creation of bonds between consumers and brands (Almeida et al., 2017), and tends to explore the entire sentimental and emotional dimension that arises from these relationships (Silva & Santos, 2012), which are highly marked by the duality of individualism and tribalism.

It is a network of consumers who, despite their demographic and psychographic differences, are united by shared emotions. This unity enables them to act collectively towards a common goal, fostering a sense of community and belonging. Maffesoli (1996) initially based the concept of tribe on a neo-tribal theory, and Cova (1997) ended up stimulating a fusion of values between tribal thinking and the marketing population. This concept draws from values considered archaic, such as local identification, religiosity, syncretism, and group narcissism, where social order is maintained without a central authority or rules (Cova & Cova, 2002). With the continuous evolution and transformation of society, there is a possibility that humanity is experiencing a third wave of tribal thinking (Coffin et al., 2023). In light of this, some authors (Wickstrom et al., 2021; Murphy et al., 2023; Hietala, 2023; Schwarz et al., 2023) argue for the progression of the tribal phenomenon, as new perspectives on virtual tribes emerge.

Contemporary society often regards the world of sport with an almost sacred reverence. In this context, sports fans exhibit a range of behaviors and attitudes that transform sport into a modern-day ritual, enhancing their connection and identification with it (Dionísio et al., 2008). A sports fan is someone who forms a strong emotional bond with a club or team, investing time, money, and energy due to the sense of belonging and identity associated with the sports entity (Asada et al., 2020; Wann, 2006). Fans are recognized as individuals who continuously talk and think about sport, even when they are not actively watching a sporting event. The level of identification with a team significantly influences fan behavior and reactions (Bouchet et al., 2011). This identification is rooted in the emotions experienced (Hu & Tang, 2010), which promote strong personality traits such as openness to new experiences and extroversion (Wann et al., 2004). Consequently, fans are more likely to identify with socially valuable groups on social media, which provide psychological support and validate the perceived benefits of belonging and identification (Asada et al., 2020). Rituals in sport are often understood as repetitive, formal, sequential actions that are distinct from technical performance and are believed to be powerful in controlling luck or other external factors (Bartošová et al., 2017). The generation of emotions within

a group influences the extent and ability to maintain coherence beyond specific events. Symbols play a crucial role in this process, as they emerge from the focused attention on particular objects, encompassing both 'anonymous crowds' and 'personal identities and narratives' (Von Scheve et al., 2014). Tribal fans express their devotion to a sports entity through their level of identity and identification with the club or team. Factors such as loyalty, value to the club, and the number of games attended in a season can be used to assess fan behavior, highlighting the various opportunities that organizations can leverage (Carvalho, 2020).

The generation of emotions among members of a group determines the degree and capacity to maintain coherence beyond specific events. Symbols are fundamental to this process, as they result from the concentration of attention on specific objects, according to 'anonymous crowds' and 'personal identities and narratives' (Collins, 2004, p. 87). In fact, according to Cova and Cova (2002), the meanings of tribal symbols are elementary and, as such, are constructed within a tribal culture, negotiated and interpreted by individuals from that specific subculture, and do not exist in isolation.

The impact of identification with the team and satisfaction with sports results are extremely important factor in the likelihood of loyalty and influence on purchasing intentions. The identification of fans with sporting entities or personalities is perceived as emotional symbiosis and the sharing of values between the committed parties (Katz et al., 2020). Fan interactions can manifest in various ways, primarily through offering support to the team across different channels (both online and offline) and on various occasions (Huettermann et al., 2022). These interactions are a direct result of the engagement strategies crafted by organizations, which aim to highlight, identify, understand, and anticipate the needs of the audience to foster reciprocal and profitable relationships between brands and individuals (Vivek et al., 2012).

The tribal consumption caused by the combination of certain behavioral elements has led brands to rethink their marketing strategy for all the reasons mentioned so far.

Interactions shared between fans have a huge impact on value creation when compared to individual consumption practices (Yngfalk, 2013). The more resources the club or sports organization has at the tribe's disposal, the more likely it is to benefit. With this as a premise, brands are able to obtain gradual advantages depending on the level of commitment they establish. Consequently, the stronger this commitment or involvement, the greater the tribalization of the brand and the company's perceived benefit from this relationship (Silva & Santos, 2012). The strength of these tribal affiliations often persists even in the face of adversity, highlighting their resilience and emotional depth (Tajfel & Turner, 2004).

Tribal behavior in marketing describes how consumers form brand tribes—social groups centered around shared admiration for a brand. These tribes foster identity, belonging, and communal interaction (Richardson, 2013; Veloutsou, 2011). The elements of tribal behavior can vary and appear in different forms, depending on the context, the nature of the group, and the community under analysis. Similarly, concepts such as loyalty, value to the club, or even the number of games attended in a season can be used to determine or evaluate fan behavior (Sierra& Taute, 2019). While this behavior has elements, it also demonstrates the various potentialities that organizations can exploit in order to achieve a clear competitive advantage (Carvalho, 2020). The elements of tribal behavior tend to vary depending on their context, the nature of the group, and the community under analysis. And they can base on either a broad construct or an extremely specific one. According to Dionísio et al. (2008), these can be measured by rituals, symbolism, sacred places, and identity values.

2.1.1 Rituals or habits

Rituals, or superstitions, in sport are often understood as repetitive, formal, sequential actions distinct from technical performance that are believed to be powerful in controlling luck or other external factors (Bartošová et al., 2017). According to Rook (2007, p. 83), the concept of ritual can be defined as: "(...) a type of expressive and symbolic activity constructed of multiple behaviors that take place in a fixed and episodic sequence and tend to repeat themselves over time."

According to the same author, this definition involves both religious and non-religious behaviors. And in order for them to fulfill their purpose effectively, there are elementary measurable facts, such as objects of worship, specific clothes, ceremonies or sacred places, specific or sacred words, and, finally, idols, icons or sacred images (Cova & Cova, 2002).

All of which, in one way or another, promote greater holistic well-being of high content and significance, at a mental, emotional, physical and spiritual level (Maranise, 2013).

Neale (2009), concluded that fans who reveal more ritualistic details are those who do not limit their behavior for the support and success of the sports entity or team. This element, although it may seem complex, is the expression of constant desires and needs. Mazurkiewicz (2011) characterizes them according to their complexity (group or individual) and their timing (fixed time or crisis time). And Bartošová et al. (2017) according to their function (relieving anxiety).

Even for the most skeptical, the sports environment is likely to be perceived as uncomfortable and can therefore lead to higher levels of anxiety for athletes, coaching staff, and fans (Burke et al., 2006). Although there are clear differences in terminology between the various authors (Damisch et al., 2010; Schippers & Lange, 2006) who have looked at the subject, as a superstitious component, it is possible to find a convergent point, the reduction of mental tension at the time of the pre-competition and the

positive feeling of self-efficacy. Rituals in sports are often understood as repetitive, formal, sequential actions that are distinct from technical performance and are believed to be powerful in controlling luck or other external factors (Bartošová et al., 2017).

2.1.2 Symbolisms

The generation of emotions among the members of a group determines the degree and ability to maintain coherence beyond specific events. And symbols are fundamental to this process, as they result from the concentration of attention on specific objects, according to "anonymous crowds" and "personal identities and narratives" (Collins, 2004, p. 87). In fact, according to Cova and Cova (2002), the meanings of tribal symbols are elementary and are constructed within a tribal culture, negotiated and interpreted by individuals of that specific subculture.

The symbols enforce a particular version of moral and aesthetic ideas as singular and indisputable by depicting them as completely in harmony with the actual and imagined experience of life (Kumar, 2021).

In this sense, the symbolic nature of a ritual functions in the form of a communicational code, which is known and accepted by the community (Seabra & Rodrigues, 1998). Banister and Hogg (2004) point out that symbolic products are social tools and can function as symbols of individuality/singularity, symbols of selfhood/social distinction, and symbols of social affiliation/identification. For Costa (2010), it is not unreasonable to understand that everything in soccer manifests its symbolic nature, almost like a manifestation of its universal phenomenon.

through emblematic and metaphorical characteristics: Spatial: Scenarios where sporting events take place; Temporal: Times and temporal spaces of sporting events; Social: Grounds where sporting events take place; Materials: Game objects, flags and merchandising; Personified: Actors who represent and act in sports scenarios; Linguistic: Proper vocabulary and technical expressions of the sporting context; Competitive: Competitions and moments of sporting dispute.

Therefore, sports teams and clubs are full of symbols that can range from jerseys, logos, colors, chants, athletes, among many others (Dionísio et al., 2008). Soccer, as a "social phenomenon", mirrors society and, as a "symbolic phenomenon", translates its proper functioning (Costa, 2010, p. 38). Banister and Hogg (2004) point out that symbolic products are social tools and can function as symbols of individuality/singularity, symbols of autonomy/social distinction, and symbols of social affiliation/identification. Football, as a 'social phenomenon', mirrors society and, as a 'symbolic phenomenon', reflects its proper functioning (Costa, 2010).

2.1.3 The sacred place

Sports venues have a complex meaning for athletes and fans that can hardly be explained in exclusively descriptive terms. In the first instance, it is even similar, in certain aspects, to religious places (Ellis, 2019). Sports as a socio-historical-cultural phenomenon have a moral status, precisely because it is a spectacle of confrontation or competition. Since ancient times, the place where sports events took place has represented a portal of excellence, and everything that happened there was considered sacred. As if it were another dimension, where the gods were present and life transcended the limits of human existence (Monteiro et al., 2014). Although until the middle of the 20th century, the sacred place or place of worship "constituted a space of universal symbolic representation", today there are countless examples buildings, "equipped with all the technical resources that allow their spaces to be shared by various forms of worship" (Cruz, 2012, p. 489).

So, for most sports fans, the stadium, field, or pavilion is a sacred place (Dionísio et al., 2008). And the idea that a sports venue can be analogous to a religious temple is nothing new (Fulconis & Pache, 2014), because for tribes, places of worship are mainly where fans come together and share experiences, memories, and lives. They applaud the team, sing songs of support, raise scarves, and wave flags (Teixeira, 2017).

The privileged venues where sports practices and celebrations take place contribute in many ways to experiences that can be described as mystical, charismatic, communal, and stimulating (Ellis, 2019). After all, the desire to win, improve performance, and transcend current performance is at the heart of sport for all participants, without exception. Sports venues or facilities hold a profound significance for athletes and fans, often likened to religious sites (Ellis, 2019).

The notion that a sports venue can be akin to a religious temple is well-established (Fulconis & Pache, 2014), as these places serve as communal hubs where fans gather to share experiences, memories, and life stories. It is where they cheer for their team, sing support songs, wave scarves, and display flags (Teixeira, 2017). The more resources a club or sports entity provides to its fan base, the greater the potential for achieving positive outcomes.

2.1.4 Identity values

The relationship between fans and the sporting world is a transcendent and omnipresent phenomenon in Western culture (Silva, 2019). Almeida et al. (2017) believe that, as far as the degree of identification is concerned, there has been a growing concern to increase and strengthen these psychological connections between sports organizations and their fans, because the stronger this connection is, the more likely it is that the fan will become loyal." In other words, the impact of identification with the team and satisfaction with sports results are extremely important elements for the likelihood of loyalty

and influence on purchase intention (Gray & Wert-Gray, 2012). For Katz et al. (2020), fans' identification with sport entities or characters is perceived as emotional symbiosis and the sharing of values between the committed parties. Thus, identification can be divided into two notable dimensions (Genchev et al., 2021):

– Emotional involvement: Psychological connection between fans and club;

– Personal commitment: Engagement behaviors between fans and the club.

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004) has proved to be an excellent framework for various studies on the phenomenon of fandom, since it allows us to understand and frame the behavioral characteristics of fans, given their identification with the group they belong to, which is part of their personal extension or extended self.

Therefore, fans with a high degree of identification with their club or team tend to invest more time, resources, and money in the relationship in order to demonstrate their loyalty and the unshakeable bond that unites their affiliation (Pontes et al., 2020).

The individual identification that each fan feels towards the tribal group becomes a collective and shared identification (Dholakia et al., 2004), where there is a natural affective involvement that shows agreement with the procedures of the pertaining community (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). Thus, the greater the degree of identification felt by the sports fan, the greater their involvement and dependence. These values affect emotional involvement, or psychological attachment, and personal commitment, or engagement behavior, between fans and the club.

2. 2 Digital potential of tribal behavior

The tribal consumption caused by the combination of certain behavioral elements has led brands to rethink their marketing strategy for all the reasons mentioned so far.

Interactions shared between fans have a huge impact on value creation when compared to individual consumption practices (Yngfalk, 2013). In this way, when a tribe promotes a positive relationship with the brand, the individuals who are part of it feel committed and able to persuade those who involve them (friends and family) (Brito & Lencastre, 2014). Sports organizations' awareness of the potential inherent in tribal consumption requires the need to metamorphose the tribal member into a kind of co-creator and make them an integral member of the process of developing marketing strategies (Dionísio et al., 2008), without them being fully aware of it. Companies, therefore, feel the need to look at tribes as facilitators, capable of helping to develop the brand and not just as another player in the giant market in which they operate.

2.2.1 Digital Interaction

The evolution of internet communication has transformed traditional one-way messaging into dynamic, multidirectional exchanges, enabling richer and more participatory forms of interaction (Melancon & Dalakas, 2018). This shift, driven by the digital revolution, has redefined societal expectations and modes of sociability, with social media emerging as a central force in this transformation (Kotler et al., 2021). In the context of sports, particularly during periods of social or organizational turbulence, fostering digital integration between fans and sports brands becomes essential. As Mastromartino et al. (2020) argue, such integration must not only leverage the benefits of digital platforms but also sustain personal involvement with the brand—where loyalty persists even in the absence of immediate gratification or substitutable alternatives.

This sustained involvement is conceptualized as engagement, a persistent cognitive-affective state that extends beyond transactional behavior (Kim et al., 2013). Kapferer (2008) emphasizes that engagement reflects a deep personal connection with the brand, making it a critical focus for sports organizations aiming to cultivate long-term loyalty.

Engaged consumers are characterized by their willingness to participate and share, even passively, through content consumption or user-generated contributions (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). However, to effectively harness this engagement, organizations must monitor and evaluate these behaviors using relational metrics that capture abstract dimensions such as emotional resonance and perceived meaning (Dessart et al., 2016; Gomes, 2018). Borel and Christodoulides (2016) propose a tripartite model of engagement that should guide digital content strategies: Cognitive engagement: driven by the need for information and understanding; Emotional engagement: rooted in affective attachment and trust; Behavioral engagement: reflected in active, sustained participation. Successful digital interaction in sports marketing hinges on a nuanced engagement strategy that addresses these three dimensions, fostering meaningful and enduring connections between fans and brands.

2.2.2 eWom

Nowadays, the content that is born uninterruptedly in the online universe does not have a fixed starting point, so it can take on different forms. According to Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004), the emergence of the internet was the key reason for the ways in which relationships and shared experiences evolved and took new directions. In essence, for the new image of Word-of-Mouth (WOM) to take hold, it must this time in an electronic and digital dimension.

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOW) refers to the process of exchanging information that may include positive and/or negative aspects of a brand's products or services by current, former, or potential consumers, which is shared on the internet and accessible to anyone (Sulthana & Vasantha, 2019). The

evaluation of personal experiences expressed via social media or other electronic platforms. It is considered highly influential information because it is independent of the brand or company (Miremadi & Haghayegh, 2022).

King et al. (2014) identify some characteristics that distinguish the evolution of the act of passing word (from WOM to eWOM), not least because communication that takes place in a digital environment offers various platforms where momentary experiences can be shared, quickly and verifiably. By emerging as a new communication paradigm, eWOM permanently connects people to each other and to the world (Seo & Park, 2018). Where the production and dissemination of informative or valuable content is no longer the exclusive preserve of companies, firm-generated content (Bruhn et al., 2012). Now, consumers, as authors of knowledge and content, are gaining progressive power over products, services, and user-generated content (Pitta et al., 2016). Although there is no consensus on the impact of this valence, consumers are willing to criticize the value of a product or service and base an evaluation on it as a fundamental element of the potential relationship (Cheung et al., 2008).

2.2.3 Brand advocacy

Brand advocacy refers to the behavior of customers who actively promote and recommend a brand to others, often driven by strong emotional connections, satisfaction, or loyalty. Is also considered a driver of brand loyalty, mediated by trust and relationship quality (Quaye et al., 2022). Kotler (2017) argues that brand advocacy is the most recent definition of loyalty,

since those who become advocates of a brand must reveal high levels of identification and affective and emotional involvement with it. According to Fullerton (2011), brand advocacy is closely tied to affective commitment and manifests through positive word-of-mouth and brand recommendations. Advocacy, whether positive or negative, has a strong influence on how a brand's image is established in the minds of consumers. Individuals who are loyal are equally willing to

build positive advocacy for a particular organization (Kotler, 2017).

2.2.4 Intention to buy online

The constant improvement in the quality of services provided online (Asshidin et al., 2016), as well as the stimulation of trust in digital e-commerce platforms (Suh et al., 2015), has generated a significant increase in terms of the volume and value of commercial transactions and, consequently, purchase intent. According to Lu et al. (2014), this concept characterizes intent as a desire to purchase a particular product or service at a specific time and in a specific context. Purchase intention is the individual's predisposition to purchase a product or service and is seen as the main indicator of behaviour (Peña-García et al., 2020). Wijayanto et al. (2023) argue that purchase intention is an action

that consumers take after obtaining positive information from other people who have taken the same action.

Understanding the purchasing intent of an entity's target audience is a key part of the process of analyzing and predicting their behavior (Pappas, 2016). There are factors that can determine consumer behavior when making an online purchase. Geraldo and Mainardes (2017), following the lead of previous studies on this subject (Gatautis et al., 2014; Swar & Panda, 2023), analyzed and determined a group of four factors that explain the consumer's intention to buy online:

• Online store: Precise, up-to-date, and relevant design; clear and efficient navigation; and an attractive and professional appearance make it easy for users to access.

• Convenience: The perceived usefulness in relation to the benefits acquired in the transaction or purchase determines consumer decision-making;

• Promotion: Improved procedures, loyalty promotions, and personalized online promotions increase the user's willingness to buy;

• Trust: The belief factor that generates benevolence, competence, and integrity in the purchaser contributes to commercial exchanges.

The research by Jiang et al. (2019) and Kong et al. (2020) supports this last premise with empirical evidence. The greater the trust consumers have in the entity they are using, the greater their intention to buy. The risk taken is inevitably lower. On the other hand, Fortes and Santos (2020) go one step further by studying elements that influence purchase intention and understand that, in addition to those mentioned above, eWOM, the quality of the online service provided and online trust are determining conditions capable of having a positive effect on consumers' willingness to buy online.

2.2.5 Digital marketing

Digital marketing represents an update or renewal of traditional marketing, based on communication strategies using new digital technologies as a means of promoting and marketing their goods and services (Kotler, 2017). IJAR (2019) describes digital marketing as a strategy that combines technology with traditional marketing to communicate electronically with consumers.

Digital marketing refers to the use of digital technologies—such as the internet, mobile devices, social media, search engines, and other digital channels—to promote products and services, engage with customers, and analyze marketing performance. It is a form of marketing that leverages digital platforms and environments to facilitate the exchange of goods and services, emphasizing its role in both commercial and non-commercial contexts (Ferié, 2020).

This concept of the web acts as a dynamic, robust, and sustainable platform that simplifies the search, storage and exchange, and management of data, information, and content between different users, in

an interactive and collaborative way (Mabić et al., 2019). Digital marketing is no longer just a promotional tool but a transformative force driving innovation, integration, and inclusion in business practices (Pandey, 2024). The emergence of this new era shows companies shifting their efforts to where their audiences are and spend more time, as proof of their efforts to grow on the marketing platforms in vogue, such as the digital platforms of social media and social networks (Bleize & Antheunis, 2019). Nowadays, these platforms play a major role in shaping consumer behavior and attitudes, leading to a greater emphasis on social media and less on traditional marketing strategies (Cheung et al., 2020).

The social and digital phenomenon is therefore generating mutations in the interactions between consumers and brands (Tsai & Men, 2013), by providing perfect channels for companies to achieve globalization, in terms of their customers, and thus build their relationships that result in inevitable behavioral influence (Yoshida et al., 2018). Social media platforms, in particular, have emerged as central arenas for fan interaction, enabling real-time communication, content co-creation, and emotional resonance (Zuckerman et al., 2021; Ashley & Tuten, 2015). Small groups of individuals, often divergent from the rest, emerge as a subculture and end up not being the main market for companies (Zolotukhin et al., 2020). However, they form an extremely unique community, embedded in a specific niche (Prakriti & Yadav, 2019).

2.2.5.1 Fan engagement

The phenomenon of consumer engagement has received greater attention due to its role in organizing interactions between entities and their target consumers, since sports entities acquire information about the expectations and needs of those who follow them (Santos et al., 2018). The set of interactions promoted by fans can take many forms. However, it essentially comes from offering support to the team, in different channels (online and offline) and on different occasions (Huettermann et al., 2022). These interactions are a clear consequence of the engagement conceived by organizations, since it focuses on the conception that highlights, identifies, understands, and anticipates the needs of the public, in order to stimulate reciprocal and profitable relationships between brands and individuals (Vivek et al., 2012).

According to Carlson and O'Cass (2012), in the context of fan engagement, a brand is not just a name, i.e. it is not just about the positioning it affirms or the marketing strategies it applies. It is a promise to its consumers, which must be supported and sustained in the long term. In this way, organizations in the sports sector should look for strategies that increase their audience and, of course, provoke feelings increase retention levels (Biscaia et al., 2012)

In the same context as fan engagement, the concept of love branding and brand lovers emerged. This sphere of concepts, whose main essence is based on appealing to emotions and feelings, was introduced in order to measure the levels of love that a consumer candevelop for a brand, as a condition of emotional involvement (Baena, 2016). No brand is free from maintaining an emotional relationship with its audience or target (Costa et al., 2019). In this way, Pereira (2020, p. 32) assures us that the fan's love for the sports organization, as an "emerging factor in relationships, arises over time of experience and use". Naturally, this feeling doesn't happen in the first instance. It the result of the evolution of the affinity and constant closeness that are incited by the communication that is established over time.

2.2.5.2 Online sports communities

The high levels of fanaticism, identification with the club, and emotional attachment to sports brands demonstrate the intrinsic power that sports communities carry in online media. The concept of community is based on a central construct of social thought (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001), which has a variety of definitions (Porter, 2004). With the evolution of computer networks comes the gathering of people, without geographical limits, based on a broad network of cultural interests and social affiliations (Kozinets, 2018). Such gatherings have been variously called computer-mediated (Etzioni & Etzioni, 1997), online or virtual communities (Carver, 1999). Nowadays, affinities and identical interests are sought, where communities online bring together consumers with similar tastes. And, for this reason, they become more popular, manipulated by the experiences and opinions of those they trust, such as members of their online community, friends, and acquaintances (Pereira, 2013).

Online sports communities are digital spaces where fans gather to share their passion for sports, engage in discussions, and build social connections around teams, athletes, and events. These communities often foster strong emotional bonds, identity formation, and participatory culture (Levental, 2023).

Considering sports clubs or entities as brands, fans tend to opt for brands that represent them as a whole and align with their beliefs and expectations, as a self-expression of themselves (Wallace, 2014). Fans exhibit patterns of loyalty, irrational tolerance, and partisanship, as the emotional and symbolic value comes from social identification (Wiid & Cant, 2015). According to Knobloch-Westerwick et al. (2020), the simple fact that there is an online community where fans can share the team's defeat and less positive moments makes them overcome and continue their support for the team.

2.3 Crisis management

In an organizational context, crises can occur at any time and in any entity. According to Janssen et al. (2015), a corporate crisis is more than a dynamic and complex process, arising from internal or external factors, which causes imbalances in the organizational system. Hence, the importance of maintaining

crisis management practices, especially when the concept may be in the hands of a general public that reacts emotionally, such as public opinion and sports fans. Digital platforms offer unique affordances for crisis response, including immediacy, interactivity, and personalization (Lim & Brown-Devlin, 2021).

The concept of crisis carries a negative and calamitous connotation, as it is perceived as a risky situation, according to Fearn-Banks (2016, p.2): 'A crisis is an important occurrence with a potentially negative outcome that affects the organization, company or industry, as well as its audiences, products, services or good reputation. (...) The size of the organization is irrelevant. It can be a multinational corporation, a one-person company, or even an individual.' For Coombs and Holladay (2012), the concept of crisis is based on the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectations of stakeholders and generates negative results. LeBlanc (2023) emphasizes that crisis management is the systematic process of preparing for, responding to, and recovering from unexpected disruptive events. It includes leadership, communication and organizational adaptability. However, Garcia and Doorley (2020) counter and explain that a crisis is not necessarily a catastrophic event, but rather an event that causes damage to reputation, operations or finances. Sarmento (2021) explains that in all types of organizations, there is room for catastrophes, unexpected moments and defeats. As such, the sports sector is no exception. According to Koerber and Zabara (2017), the biggest sports crises were the result of defeats over several seasons, especially if these were an impediment to achieving the positive goals that were initially set. Bruce and Tini (2008, p. 109) argue that 'sports organizations spend most of their time reacting to unplanned events that can negatively influence public attitudes'. However, crises that occur in sports environments are not capable of easily damaging images or disconnecting fans, since the bond between fans and the club is stronger than a product (Koerber & Zabara, 2017).

To Luecke & Barton (2004), crisis management, therefore, involves rapid decision-making, communication, and coordination to mitigate harm and restore stability. During the crisis response phase, it is essential to ensure a prompt and secure response from the organization in the shortest possible time (Coombs, 2007). This is because an effective crisis response can provide entities with a competitive advantage and enhance their reputation (Garcia & Doorley, 2020). In the final, post-crisis phase, the effectiveness of crisis management must be determined, without ever forgetting its continuous monitoring, given the possibility of recurrence (Edwards & Usher, 2010).

2.3.1 Sports crisis

The crisis of modern sport appears to be one of the most significant indicators that it is essential to rethink traditional models of sports organization (Lopes & Pires, 2004). According to Koerber and

Zabara (2017), the biggest sporting crises have resulted from defeats over the course of seasons, especially if these have been an obstacle to achieving the positive goals that were initially set. Still, there are other factors that foster an unstable situation, such as off-field situations, bad behavior, and reflections on general identity problems in sport (Brown & Billings, 2013).

According to Behlau et al. (2024), a sports crisis is defined as a negative, potentially harmful, or threatening event that disrupts the normal functioning of individuals, teams, or organizations in the sports context. These crises can occur at macro (societal), meso (organizational), or micro (individual) levels and often require urgent attention and response. Few have left a big enough stain to become a real threat to ticket sales, merchandising, and the club's brand. Sport is a game of emotions that arouses almost undeniable loyalty in fans (Koerber & Zabara, 2017). Bruce and Tini (2008, p. 109) argue that "sports organizations spend most of their time reacting to unplanned events that can negatively influence public attitudes". However, crises that occur in sporting environments are not capable of damaging images or disconnecting fans easily, since the bond between fans and the club is greater than a product (Koerber & Zabara, 2017).

According to Coombs (2007), a crisis can be divided into three phases: pre-crisis, crisis response, and post-crisis. The first phase is based on a constant audit environment as a preventive measure against all threats that deserve respect from the organization (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). In order for the club to be, it is important to "establish methods for monitoring any problems that may come to haunt it" (Diegues, 2011, p.11). During the crisis response phase, it is essential to guarantee a prompt and safe response from the organization in the shortest time possible (Coombs, 2007). This is because an effective crisis response can give organizations a competitive advantage and increase their reputation (Garcia & Doorley, 2020). In the final, post-crisis phase, the effectiveness of crisis management must be determined, without ever forgetting its continuous monitoring, thanks to the possibility of its reoccurrence (Edwards & Usher, 2010). Even so, after the whole situation, the difficulty is to discern the potential opportunities in a post-crisis situation (Vasques, 2012). Once a crisis has occurred, it doesn't have to be seen as something necessarily negative. It should be a reason learn by analyzing the mistakes and actions that triggered it (Coombs, 2007; Usman et al., 2022).

Summarizing, tribal marketing provides a theoretical basis for understanding the formation and dynamics of fan communities in the sports context. Tribal elements and potential play a fundamental role in building identity and strengthening the emotional ties between fans and the club. While the sports crisis is a challenging context that requires an in-depth understanding of these concepts and the application of appropriate Digital Marketing strategies to mitigate the negative impacts.

2.3.2 Digital tribalism in crisis contexts

The concept of digital tribalism has gained increasing relevance in the study of consumer behavior, particularly within the domain of sports marketing. Rooted in the theoretical framework of tribal marketing (Cova & Cova, 2002), digital tribalism refers to the formation of emotionally bonded consumer groups -"tribes" - that coalesce around shared values, rituals, and symbolic affiliations within digital environments. These tribes are not defined by traditional demographic or geographic boundaries but by a collective identity that is expressed and reinforced through digital interaction, symbolic consumption, and communal engagement (Muharam, 2024). The intersection of digital marketing and tribal behavior becomes particularly salient during crises. While digital tools can reinforce tribal connections through symbolic content and community engagement, their effectiveness is contingent on the emotional state of the fan base. Studies suggest that during crises, fans may shift from active engagement to passive consumption, maintaining symbolic loyalty while withdrawing from interactive behaviors (Kozinets, 1999; Muharam et al., 2024).
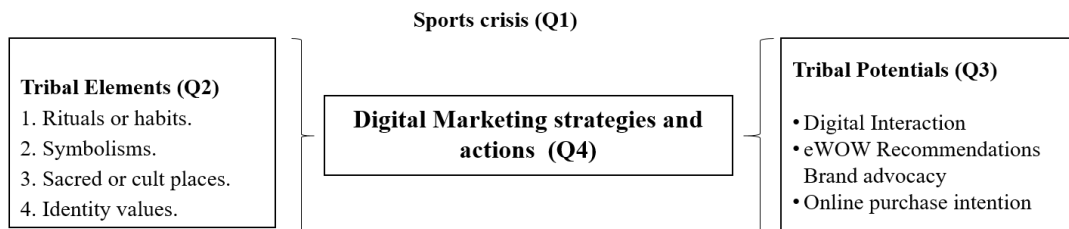
In the context of sports fandom, digital tribalism manifests through a range of behaviors including the ritualistic following of matches, the use of club-related symbols (e.g., logos, chants, merchandise), and the occupation of sacred digital spaces such as official social media pages and fan forums. These behaviors are underpinned by identity values that reflect a deep emotional investment in the club, often transcending the outcomes of individual matches or seasons (Dionísio et al., 2008; Maffesoli, 1996). However, the dynamics of digital tribalism are significantly altered in the face of organizational crises.

A crisis, whether stemming from poor performance, financial instability, or reputational damage, disrupts the normative patterns of fan engagement and challenges the emotional cohesion of the tribe (Garcia & Doorley, 2020). In such contexts, digital tribalism functions both as a resilience mechanism and as a diagnostic lens through which shifts in fan behavior can be observed. This shift underscores the need for emotionally intelligent marketing strategies that align with the fluctuating sentiments of fan communities. Rather than attempting to override negative emotions, successful strategies acknowledge and adapt to them, fostering a sense of solidarity and shared identity even in adversity (Cova & Cova, 2002; Silva & Santos, 2012).

3. METHODOLOGY

This study aimed to explore the dynamics of tribal behavior, digital marketing, and fan perception during a sports crisis, using a Portuguese football club as a case study. The discussion integrates

netnographic and questionnaire data, interpreted through the lens of consumer tribe theory and crisis communication, as well as digital marketing strategies.

Defining the objectives is an essential step, since only once they have been answered can the study be considered complete (Schoo-nenboom, 2019). The general objective of the research is to determine the impact of a sports crisis on digital marketing strategies as promoters of tribal consumption. Based on the objective and the literature review carried out for the current research work, particularly in terms of tribal elements and tribal potential, a conceptual model was developed (Figure 1) which brings together two major dimensions that can be broken down: In the antecedents, as tribal elements characteristic of fans (rituals or habits, symbolism, sacred or cult sites and identity values), and in the consequents, as tribal potentialities (digital interaction, eWOM recommendation, brand advocacy and purchase intention) resulting from Digital Marketing actions and strategies, in a context of sports crisis. A conceptual model (Figure 1) was developed that reflects the intention to relate the two major dimensions that can be broken down: the antecedents, as tribal elements characteristic of fans (rituals, symbolism, sacred or worship sites, and identity values), and the consequences, as tribal potentialities (digital interaction, eWOM recommendation, brand advocacy, and purchase intention) resulting from Digital Marketing actions and strategies in a context of sporting crisis.

Sports crisis (Q1)

Tribal Elements (Q2)	**Digital Marketing strategies and actions (Q4)**	**Tribal Potentials (Q3)**
1. Rituals or habits. 2. Symbolisms. 3. Sacred or cult places. 4. Identity values.		• Digital Interaction • eWOW Recommendations Brand advocacy • Online purchase intention

Figure 1. Conceptual Model

Based on the bibliographic study and the above-mentioned model, the research questions (RQ) raised comply with a series of criteria proposed by Thabane et al. (2009) and present the properties of a good research question, namely feasibility, interest, originality, ethicality, and relevance.

- RQ1: How do sporting fans perceive the sporting crisis?
- RQ2: What tribal elements do fans display in a sporting context?
- RQ3: What tribal potential do fans show in a sporting context?
- RQ4: What role do digital marketing strategies play in a sports crisis?

Since this is a preliminary phase of the study, an exploratory methodology was necessary, employing a single case study approach to gain deeper insights into the topic and to establish propositions or

hypotheses for future research. It is considered appropriate to adopt an exploratory methodology using the case study method, whose data analysis technique is both qualitative and quantitative (Galvão et al., 2017). A single case study methodology is a qualitative research approach that involves an in-depth, contextual analysis of a single instance or event -often referred to as a "case"-to explore complex phenomena within their real-life settings (Yin, 2014). The case is studied within its natural context, considering environmental, social, and organizational factors. It is often used to answer "how" and "why" questions, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2021). This is not just a form of qualitative research, as it can generate a mixture of qualitative and quantitative evidence (Yin, 2015). From a complementary and more conclusive perspective, quantitative analysis emerges, defined as formal and structured research supported by representative samples subjected to quantitative analysis (Rodríguez, 2017). At a qualitative level, netnography was applied, which is a research technique suitable for communities in the digital environment, enabling the study of cultures, groups and societies that communicate through electronic devices (Kozinets, 2020). For the collection of primary data, within the scope of quantitative research, a questionnaire was constructed and tested in advance as a structured data collection instrument, aimed at a set of individuals who constitute a relevant sample of the population under study.

3.1 Data Collection

Netnography or online ethnography, as the terminology of the expression indicates, is a research technique derived from ethnography, suitable for communities in the digital environment, enabling the study of cultures, groups, and societies that communicate through electronic devices (Kozinets, 2020). Although it is not a new data collection technique, netnography is seen as a tool that allows the potential of traditional ethnography to be expanded, as it takes into account the specificities of contemporary society and the digital environment (Corrêa & Rozados, 2017).

In marketing research, netnography plays an important role in the search for habits, preferences, needs, characteristics, and social behaviors that support companies in solving certain problems. There is less and less social space for relationships outside the logic of the market (Kozinets, 2018). Netnography is faster, more accessible, and cheaper than traditional ethnography (Kozinets, 2015). What's more, it proves to be more immersive, as it gives the researcher a clear understanding of the digital media on which they base their study. The clash between relevance and quantity content is so great that it presents a richer exposure than any other type of resource inherent in traditional marketing (Oliveira et al., 2014). Kozinets (2018) established four typologies of netnography, structured into auto netnography, digital netnography, symbolic netnography, and humanistic netnography. The data

collection method explained here, for this dissertation, is based on digital netnography - a technique that uses statistical data analysis methods - and symbolic netnography – a technique that decodes the characteristics and behaviors of digital users.

One of the most important decisions at this stage of the research is to select the platforms and virtual communities that will be the object of study, with the rigor and ethical standards required (Kozinets, 2015). Due to the vast number of virtual spaces, with a focus on social networks, where SCP can be found, three platforms were chosen for research, given their disparity in terms of the public that frequents them: Face book, YouTube and TikTok. Although the club is also officially present on platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn and Telegram; and, through its fan community, on Reddit and Discord. Three different weeks of the 2022/2023 season were selected for the analysis, in a strategic and representative way negative, positive and neutral moments, based on the performance of the main soccer team and not on external factors that inevitably influence user engagement.

Week 1 (October 16, 2022 to October 21, 2022): Defeat, on the pitch, against Varzim Sport Club, a Liga 3 team, in the Portuguese Cup;

Week 2 (March 16, 2023 to March 22, 2023): Penalty shootout win on the away pitch against Arsenal Football Club for the Europa League;

Week 3 (May 7, 2023 to May 13, 2023): Normal week, with two wins against teams on the verge of relegation to the Bwin League.

As for the metrics used, since the extraction of data from the content is conditioned by full access it, the following parameters were considered: Number posts, number likes, number of comments and general content of the comments made by users, with special attention to positive keywords - of support, hope, gratitude, pride and/or resilience – and negative keywords - of criticism, frustration, anger, despair and/or disappointment.

This preliminary analysis demonstrates that user engagement and sentiment on social media platforms vary according to the performance of the football club and the nature of the event. Positive performance moments, such as the victory against Arsenal, generate higher engagement and more favorable sentiment, especially on platforms like TikTok and YouTube. Conversely, negative outcomes result in increased expressions of dissatisfaction. These insights suggest valuable directions for future research, particularly in exploring platform-specific engagement strategies and community responses to sporting events.

3.2 Questionnaire

The questionnaire was clearly structured and was part of the quantitative analysis, using the appropriate method as a data collection strategy. The questionnaire was disseminated on social media platforms

such as Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, and Discord. It consisted of two screening questions to ensure that the individual was part of the sample, i.e., that they were a supporter, fan, or member of Sporting Club of Portugal, and whether the individual was a user or frequent visitor of digital platforms such as social media, forums, websites, among others. To formulate some questions and operationalize constructs, scales based on research by other authors were used to support and substantiate their presentation throughout the quantitative method. The following Table 1 present the scales, considering the study problem:

Table 1. Main concepts and their scales

Adapted scale of motivation to become a fan	
1. Family tradition. .	Biscaia et al., 2013 Wann et al., 1999 Wann et al., 2008
2. Representation of the locality, city or country.	
3. Influence from friends or partner.	
4. Reference as an idol of a player or coach.	
5. Representation of important values.	
6. Mere chance, it just happened.	

Adapted scale of types of sports fans	
1. <u>Degree of involvement</u> 1.1. Active fan (participates/attends regularly). 1.2. Passive fan (does not participate/attend regularly).	Agas et al., 2012 Andrei, 2019
2. <u>Level of attendance</u> 2.1. Tourist supporter (participates/assists during trips). 2.2. Occasional fan (participates/watches sporadically). 2.3. Regular fan (participates/attends several). 2.4. Fanatical supporter (participates/watches everyone).	
3. <u>Advantages obtained</u> 3.1. Follower of results (looks for the club's victories). 3.2. Adept of emotions (seeks the passion of moments). 3.3. A fan of entertainment (looks for the fun of games). 3.4. Benefits enthusiast (looks for the benefits of being a member).	

Scale of belonging to a tribal group	
1. Rituals or habits. 2. Symbolisms. 3. Sacred or cult places. 4. Identity values.	Dionísio et al., 2008

Escala adaptada de tipos de crise desportiva	
1. Consecutive defeats	Sarmento, 2021 Usman et al., 2020 Hie et al., 2023
2. Ranking position below expectations.	
3. Loss of athletes to rival teams.	
4. Financial or corruption problems.	
5. Unwanted driving policies.	
6. Off-field scandals involving athletes, managers or management.	
7. Low investment in training or modalities.	
8. Terrorism or violent/discriminatory actions.	

The operationalization of the constructs used requires the appropriate use of measurement scales. The questionnaire consists of a number of questions using a Likert scale from 1 to 5. In addition to questions with a linear scale, the questionnaire includes multiple-choice questions and checkboxes to prevent deviations from the topic in question, facilitate coding and facilitate the analysis of results. Once the questionnaire has been drawn up, it must be tested before its final use, to ensure that responses are not biased by misunderstandings (Souza et al., 2017). A pre-test of questionnaire was carried out and applied to a small sample of respondents, so that they could identify and propose corrections to potential problems, both in terms of form and content. In this case, the pre-testing phase was split into two phases - the first with the supervisor and the second with individuals with the same profile as the future respondents. In relation to the first phase, changes were made to the interpretation of the Portuguese language, as well as to the position regarding the socio-demographic data section, which was moved from the first to the last section of the questionnaire.

The concept of a sample in the quantitative approach refers to a fragment taken from a universe or a population (Nobre et al., 2016). A non-probabilistic sample was used for this research, i.e. a sample in which there is a deliberate, subjective and non-random choice of the elements of the sample, according to previously defined criteria (Júnior et al., 2011); of the snowball type, where there was an initial choice of individuals in the sample who, consequently, indicate the study to other participants (Mineiro, 2020).

4. RESULTS

As mentioned above, Sporting Club of Portugal has a wide range of social media platforms where it publishes its official content and disseminates information to its community of fans.

For the netnographic analysis, three research platforms were selected, given their differences in terms of the audience they attract and the content that is published. In terms of time, three distinct weeks were strategically selected to represent negative (week 1: unexpected defeat), positive (week 2: hard-

fought victory) and neutral (week 3: expected victory) moments, based on the performance of the A team, the main football team.

4.1 Facebook

As of May, SCP's official Facebook platform has more than 2.6 million followers and an average number of posts per day, with a higher frequency on days when sporting events take place. These same days also show higher engagement figures in terms of likes, comments and shares. And, based on the objective of the study, it will be the content related to them that will be studied.

In week 1, still at a relatively early stage of the season, the defeat against a team two divisions below proved dishonorable for the fans. The barrage of comments about the coaching staff didn't let the community around the club rest. Compared to the usual figures, the club itself communicated less on this platform, with a total 14 publications, which made up a weekly average of 2,445 likes, of which several were emoticons of sadness and mockery, 1,057 comments, mainly negative, and 481 shares.

In week 2, against all the odds and predictions declared in the media, SCP beat a great English team in the biggest soccer competition in the world. And because of this, the wave of euphoria from the fans was enormous. In the 38 pieces of content published, there were thousands of messages of hope, joy and thanks for the club's special display. In this context, there was a weekly average of 21,883 likes, several of which were happy emoticons, 1,606 comments and 3,077 shares.

In week 3, although the victories were expected, there was a feeling that the culmination of the feelings developed throughout the season was dragging on. As such, there were comments showing discontent. However, as it was a week characterized by victories, the posts showed some interaction, with a focus match results, and therefore a weekly average of 4,460 likes, 543 comments and 150 shares, in the 29 match contents posted.

4.2 YouTube

As of May, the club's YouTube platform had 180,000 subscribers and more than 2,000 videos published. In addition to the audiovisual content that runs on its television channel, interviews, press conferences, best moments, renovation announcements and marketing campaigns, SCP has some regular features applauded by fans, such as Backstage Sporting (behind the scenes of soccer matches), Inside Sporting (behind the scenes of soccer training sessions), ADN de Leão (podcast), Duelos de (matches and activities) and Sporting Confidential (secrets about the day-to-day life of the teams). As with Facebook, the focus will be on content related to sporting events.

In week 1, Backstage Sporting had 10,222 views, 615 likes and 82 comments, and the post-match press conference had 22,007 views, 728 likes and 171 comments. These posts contain comments discontent

with the results, the players, the coaching staff and the club itself. The pledges of honor to the jersey are often questioned by Internet users.

In <u>week 2</u>, the Sporting Backstage saw an exponential increase and had 131,283 views, 8,800 likes and 282 comments, while the Sporting Backstage conference () had an exponential increase and had 131,283 views, 8,800 likes and 282 comments.

The post-match press release totals 87,461 views, 3,000 likes and 210 comments. Contrary to the first week analyzed, the messages of enthusiasm from the fans are widespread in this content. The comments reflect the infinite gratitude for the team's performance and the communication and marketing work carried out by the respective departments.

Finally, in <u>week 3</u>, the Sporting Backstage videos, for the match Futebol Clube Paços de Ferreira and against Clube Sport Marítimo, had an average of 12,642 views, 1,013 likes and 38 comments. The post-match press conferences had an average of 19,235 views, 756 likes and 36 comments. All of them congratulating the team on the result, which was more than demanded and expected by the fan community.

4.3 TikTok

Finally, on the most recent social network TikTok, Sporting has more than 1.2 million followers and more than 12.2 million likes. Although the club doesn't use this platform for the same purpose as those analyzed above, it does take advantage of the most strategic trends and moments at the club to produce content. And even though there are differences in the type of content created, the context and results of sporting events influence the communication established by the organization and the interaction exercised by its fans.

In <u>week 1</u>, due to the defeat, the club was absent from publications, so there was no data or statistics.

In <u>week 2</u>, SCP took advantage of the wave of happiness in the surrounding community and shared 20 videos with its followers on the platform, where it produced content the moments and trends of the network associated with the victory. The results of the analysis show a weekly average of 682,720 views, with some of the content reaching over 1 million, 82,140 likes, 457 comments, 3,065 shares and 1,765 saves. What's more, the comments show the good mood of the fans who congratulate and praise the social media manager responsible for the club's TikTok.

In <u>week 3</u>, Sporting used the moment when the team's goalkeeper was sent off to create witty content about the player who replaced him. Once again, followers showed their appreciation for the type of videos produced for the platform. The two pieces of content had an average of 272,400 views, 38,050 likes, 270 comments, 2,432 shares and 2,800 saves.
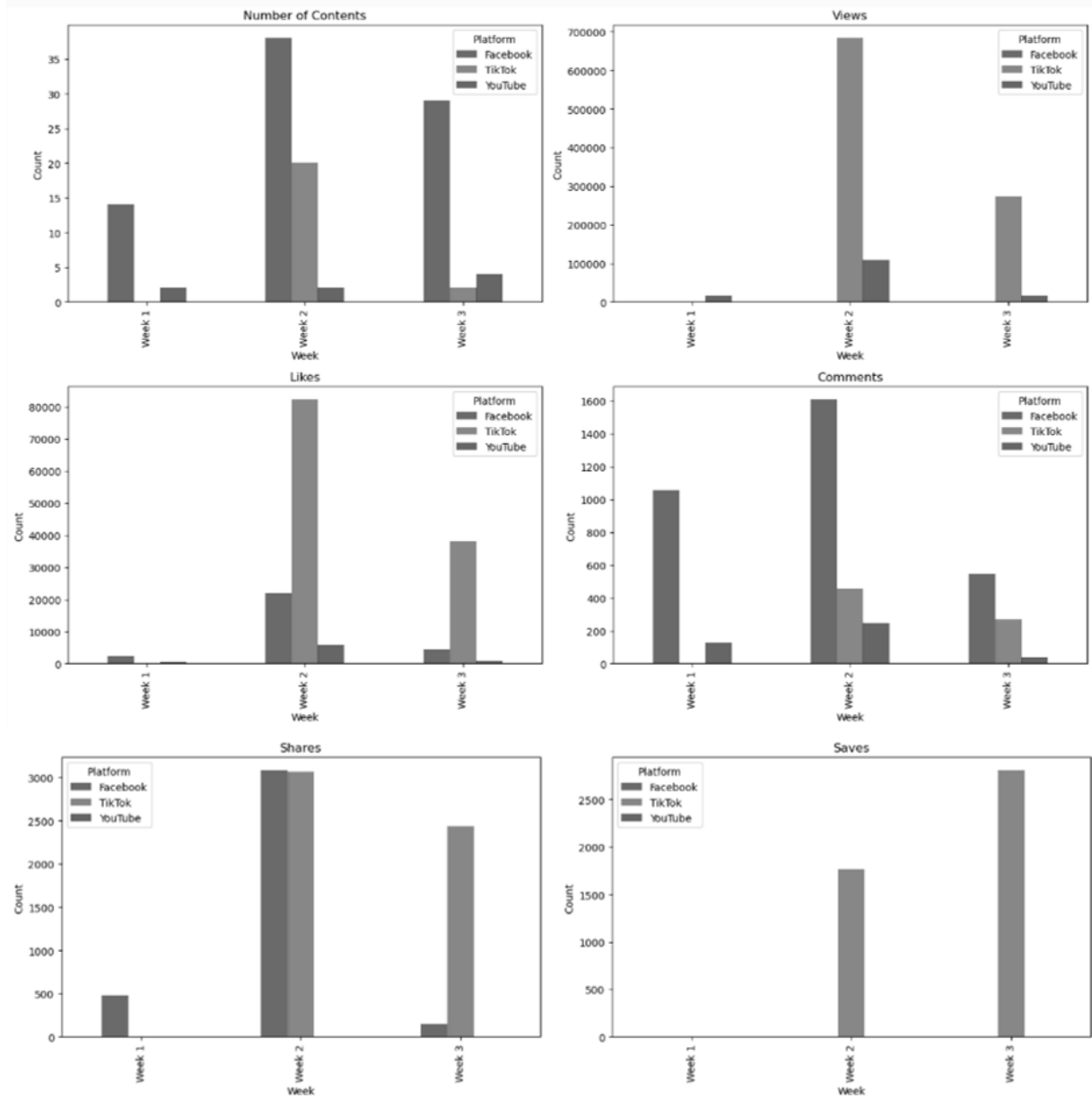
Figure 2. Visual summary of the netnographic data, Weeks 1 to 3

Table 2. Summary of Engagement and Sentiment Analysis by Platform and Week

Platform	Week	Context	Positive Sentiment	Negative Sentiment
Facebook	Week 1	Defeat vs Varzim (Portuguese Cup)	✓	✓✓✓
Facebook	Week 2	Win vs Arsenal (Europa League)	✓✓✓	✓
Facebook	Week 3	Two wins (regular week)	✓✓	✓
YouTube	Week 1	Defeat vs Varzim	✓	✓✓✓
YouTube	Week 2	Win vs Arsenal	✓✓✓	✓
YouTube	Week 3	Two wins	✓✓	✓
TikTok	Week 1	Defeat vs Varzim	✓	✓✓

| TikTok | Week 2 | Win vs Arsenal | ✓✓✓ | ✓ |
| TikTok | Week 3 | Two wins | ✓✓ | ✓ |

Legend for Sentiment: ✓ = low, ✓✓ = medium, ✓✓✓ = high intensity or frequency

Summarizing this results, Facebook consistently maintained a high number of content posts, especially in Week 2, which coincided with a major victory. However, its engagement (likes, comments, shares) was significantly lower than TikTok in the same week. YouTube had moderate content output but showed spikes in views and likes in Week 2, suggesting that fans turned to long-form content to relive or analyze the victory. TikTok demonstrated exceptional engagement in Weeks 2 and 3, especially in terms of views, likes, shares, and saves, despite having fewer posts. This highlights TikTok's high virality potential and effectiveness in leveraging trends.

The three platforms serve distinct communicative functions: Facebook facilitates broad communication through consistent content dissemination and moderate user engagement; YouTube supports in-depth storytelling, with viewership peaking during emotionally resonant events; and TikTok thrives on trend-driven, fan-centric interaction, where a limited number of posts often yield disproportionately high engagement.

Based on the results obtained from the questionnaire survey, it is possible to delineate the characteristics of the study sample. A total of 345 responses were initially collected; however, 36 of these were deemed invalid due to the respondents' failure to meet the predefined screening or filtering criteria. Consequently, the final dataset comprised 309 valid responses.

Analyzing the questionnaire data, the dataset comprises a total of 309 respondents (Table 3), with a pronounced gender imbalance. Male participants constitute the overwhelming majority (87.7%), while female respondents represent only 12.3%. The age distribution reveals a concentration of respondents in the 25 to 34 years old category, accounting for 46% of the sample. This is followed by the 18 to 24 years old group (31.1%) and the 35 to 44 years old group (14.2%). The representation of individuals under 18 and over 44 is minimal, with no participants over the age of 64. In terms of educational attainment, the majority of respondents possess higher education degrees, with 42.7% holding a degree and 31.4% a master's degree. Only a small fraction reported having secondary education (20.7%), and even fewer had basic education (1.9%) or a doctorate (1.3%). Notably, no respondents reported having only primary education. Geographically, the Lisbon region is the most represented, with 49.8% of respondents residing there. Other regions such as the North (17.8%) and Center (14.9%) also contribute significantly, while areas like the Alentejo (5.2%), Algarve (1.6%), and the Islands (2.6%) are underrepresented. Additionally, 8.1% of respondents are foreigners, indicating some degree of

international participation. The regional distribution suggests a strong urban concentration, particularly in Lisbon.

Table 3. Demographic Profile of Respondents

	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	271	87,7%
	Female	38	12,3%
		309	100%
Age	Under 18	10	3.2%
	18 to 24 years old	96	31.1%
	25 to 34 years old	142	46%
	35 to 44 years old	44	14.2%
	45 to 54 years old	11	3.6%
	55 to 64 years	6	1.9%
	Over 64	0	0%
Educational Qualifications	Primary education	0	0%
	Basic education	6	1.9%
	Secondary education	64	20.7%
	Bachelor's degree	6	1.9%
	Degree	132	42.7%
	Master's Degree	97	31.4%
	Doctorate	4	1.3%
Region of Residence	North	55	17.8%
	Center	46	14.9%
	Lisbon	154	49.8%
	Alentejo	16	5.2%
	Algarve	5	1.6%
	Islands	8	2.6%
	Foreigners	25	8.1%

Naturally, all the valid answers belonged to individuals who identified themselves as SCP supporters, fans or members. With regard to the longevity of this aspect (Table 18), the majority of respondents (49.8%) have been members of the club for as long (25 to 34 years) as they have been supporters (20 to 29 years).

Table 4. Characterization of the sample

	Frequency	Percentage
Members longevity		
Less than 1 year	3	1%
1 to 5 years	5	1,6%
5 to 9 years	9	2,9%
10 to 19 years	60	19,4%
20 to 29 years old	**154**	49,8%
Over 30 years old	78	25,2%
Total	309	100%
Level of attendance		
Occasional fan (watches sporadically)	**141**	45,6%
Regular supporter (attends many or several)	124	40,1%

Fanatical supporter (watches them all)	44	14,2%
Total	309	100%
Fan's relationship with the club		
A fan of results (looking for victories)	48	15,5%
A fan of emotions (looking for passion)	**209**	67,6%
Entertainment fan (looking for fun)	52	16,8%
A fan of benefits (looking for perks)	0	0
Total	309	100%

With regard to the fan's relationship with the club (Table 5), in terms of the advantages obtained, it was understood that the vast majority of individuals seek the passion and love of sporting moments and therefore identify themselves as fans of emotions. The remainder identify themselves fans of results and entertainment, while none identify themselves as fans of benefits, i.e. fans who seek the benefits of being part of a club, such as being subscribed to an annual/monthly service like membership.

As for digital communication platforms and online media, it can be seen that the most used or frequented social networks (Table 24) are YouTube (69.3%), Instagram (66.7%), Twitter (33.3%) and Reddit (22.8%). Of these platforms used and frequented by respondents, the majority follow or follow the content produced on the official pages (Table 25), Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, YouTube, Telegram and the club's own website.

Table 5. Fan's relationship with the club

	Frequency	**Percentage**
Facebook	121	39,2%
Instagram	**195**	63,1%
Twitter	120	38,8%
TikTok	48	15,5%
YouTube	186	60,2%
Telegram	19	6,1%
Website	68	22%
I don't follow platforms	33	10,7%

On these platforms, respondents showed little interaction with them. They said they read and follow the content published (84.8%), eventually posting likes or likes, a basic interaction, on that same content (59.2%). However, they expressed that they don't choose to comment and share the content (17.2%) or save it in their favorites (10%) for later review. What's more, 33 (10.7%) individuals confirmed that they don't even interact with that content by reading or following it.

4.4 Elements of tribal behavior

In order to analyze tribal behavior and conclude whether the SCP fan community actually represents a tribal group in the sporting sphere, four concepts intrinsic to this behavior were analyzed: rituals, symbols, sacred places, and identity values. If, for the most part, two or more statements were answered for each concept, the presence of a tribal community was determined for Sporting Club of Portugal fans.

• With regard to the regular habit or ritual element, it was found that, in order of importance, they consider attending matches to be a ritual (83.2%), wearing club accessories (51.5%), chanting or choreographing during sporting events (36.9%) and being in trailers and cafés on match days (20.4%). Around 40 (12.9%) respondents felt that none of the above constituted a ritual;

• With regard to the symbolism of SCP, there was almost unanimous support for the club's logo, colors and mascot (92.6%) and favorable support for rest, such as the stadium, pavilion and academy (78%), chants, claques and groups (61.4%), equipment and merchandising (49.5%), as well as athlete's technical teams (45%). 5 (1.6%) respondents disagreed and said that none of the above was a symbol;

• With regard to the element of a sacred place or place of worship, there was a greater divergence, although the stadium, pavilion and academy (95.3%) and the Sporting Academy Schools (54.9%) were considered by the majority to be places of worship. The nuclei, branches and delegations (23.3%), as well as the Green Shops or Sporting points of sale (9.4%) were not taken into account as places identified by the supporter community. Around 8 respondents understood that none of the previous options were identified as a sacred place or place of worship for the club;

• With regard to the identity values element, there was dispersion, but also regularity, in all the statements, as can be seen the motto "Esforço, Dedicação, Devoção e Glória" (80%), the song "O Mundo Sabe Que" (67.6%), the anthem "Marcha do Sporting" (53.4%), the expressions "verdes e brancos" and "leões" (49.8%) and the figures Peyroteo, Travassos and Ronaldo (35.6%). Of the 309 respondents, 8 did not agree with any of the above.

4.4.1 Sports crisis

The definition or concept of a sports crisis can vary depending on the context and the perspective of those analyzing it. On this topic, all respondents (100%) stated that they considered SCP to have already experienced a crisis. Given the club's current situation, 34 (11%) considered it to be in a pre-crisis phase, 92 (29.8%) in a crisis phase, 78 (25.2%) in a post-crisis phase, and 105 (34%) in a non-crisis phase. The most frequently cited reasons were: lower than expected league position, undesirable management policies, financial problems, and low investment in training.

4.4.2 Digital potential of tribal behavior

Regarding the analysis of the digital potential of tribal behaviour, the objective was to determine the impact of digital marketing actions in the context of a sporting crisis. As such, the purpose was based on classifying the attitudes of respondents in a moment of crisis – real or fictitious – in terms of the degree of interaction, eWOM recommendation, brand advocacy, and intention to purchase online with the club, on a Likert scale from one to five. In terms of the degree of digital interaction, there was a growing trend in following content published by SCP. However, when compared to possible moments of interaction, the scenario is no longer similar. Respondents showed little desire to interact, with a prevalence of those who disagreed or strongly disagreed that there would be any kind of digital relationship. On the other hand, with regard to the degree of eWOM recommendation, in a crisis situation, the predisposition of individuals to disagree or disagree with the possible behaviour they would take in defence of their club was confirmed. Just as there is a number of people who agree completely, there is also, in a minimally homogeneous way, a number who disagree completely. With regard to the degree of brand advocacy, the picture changes positively. Through this analysis, it was found that, in a moment of crisis, respondents tend to be pleased with the online connection they have established with the club and with their choice to be supporters, fans or members of SCP. In fact, when faced with the possibility of controversy, more respondents express a willingness to defend the club than those who do not. On the other hand, there does not seem to be unanimity regarding trust in the decisions published online by the club, even when faced with the trust in publicly advocating for the club in front of other internet users. Finally, with regard to the intention to purchase online, it was understood that fans tend to consider spending less money when they do not feel fulfilled by the club, especially when it comes to higher-value purchases, such as Gamebox. Even so, there is parity in the opposite of membership fees. There are as many who would put off such a purchase as there are those who would not stop investing in the club, given the current situation.

Table 6. Tribal potential

Sentences	1	2	3	4	5
I read and follow the *online* content published	16	27	70	94	102
I like the *online* content published	61	47	78	60	63
I comment positively on the *online* content published	118	47	111	15	18
I take part in the promoted *online* passages	127	52	89	25	16
I recommend SCP's content to many people	68	54	100	51	36
I speak well *online*, in every sense, of SCP	54	73	84	57	41
Defending SCP's good name on social media	62	45	81	76	45
I'm always doing good publicity for SCP *online*	79	59	106	34	31

I say positive things about SCP on social media	33	58	101	82	35
I encourage friends and family to follow SCP	17	28	80	94	90
I'm happy with my choice to be a Sportinguist	14	15	43	77	160
I'm willing to defend SCP in the face of controversy	32	35	78	68	96
I consider buying from Loja Verde *online*	48	52	78	77	54
I'm still paying my membership fees	86	21	63	53	86
I'm definitely renewing my *online* gamebox	109	41	93	28	38
Buy tickets *online* for the next match	50	34	61	64	85

5. DISCUSSION

At the beginning of the investigation, four research questions were raised as guidelines for the case study and answered through qualitative and quantitative analysis. Netnographic analysis, in the first instance, allowed for the diagnosis of user behaviour segmented by context. As for netnography, based on the neutral week, it was possible to infer inequalities in behaviour between the negative week and the positive week. If, according to the studies reviewed in the bibliographic survey and the perception represented in the questionnaire responses, consecutive defeats and a lower-than-expected ranking are reasons for a crisis, it is assumed, from the outset, that the negative week, characterised by an unthinkable defeat, represents a moment of crisis. This moment changed the behaviour of the club itself, reducing the frequency of publications and, in the same dialectic, the behaviour of the fans, reducing favourable and confident interaction. On the other hand, the positive week proved to be the antonym of the negative one, both for SCP and its surrounding community. This leads to the conclusion that the power exerted by the crisis on both sides is greater than the power of the digital marketing strategies implemented, as well as the tribal behaviour that results from them. Although some content from opposite ends of the spectrum shows similar engagement figures, the content or tone of this content demonstrates the discontent or enthusiasm generated by the current situation.

As for the questionnaire, the answers to the questions asked were analyzed and it was determined that a large part of the fan community was led to sympathize with the club due to family influences or traditions and by chance. This leads these communities to follow and apply tribal elements in their sporting relationship, through the unconscious intervention of those who motivated them to become Sporting fans. As a result, they perform rituals or frequent habits, use symbols, frequent sacred places and defend values with which they identify as their own. Although the respondents do not demonstrate through their answers that they are fanatical fans, they show that they are emotionally attached to SCP and, therefore, seek passion and love in every sporting moment. As such, they care about the current state of the club and list a series of reasons that have led to a crisis, with a predominance of those that truly reflect its current state, as clearly confirmed by the media and fan community platforms.

Examples include the lower-than-expected league position, undesirable management policies and low investment in training or other sports.

The intersection of concepts related to tribal potential with the crisis factor demonstrates the predominant influence of context, given the set of strategic resources applied by the club, as can be seen in the sub-theme below.

The findings are interpreted through the lens of consumer tribe theory (Maffesoli, 1996; Cova & Cova, 2002), digital engagement frameworks (Kapferer, 2008; Kim et al., 2013), and crisis communication literature (Kozinets, 1999; Richardson, 2012).

According to RQ1: *How do Sporting fans perceive a sporting crisis?* Quantitative data revealed that fans interpret a sporting crisis primarily through performance-related indicators such as underachievement in league standings (74.1%), financial instability (61.1%), and internal controversies including poor management and off-field scandals. These findings align with Bauer et al. (2008) and Tapp & Clowes (2002), who emphasize the emotional and symbolic weight fans place on club performance. Crises, therefore, not only disrupt organizational stability but also fracture the emotional bond between fans and the club.

According to RQ2: *What tribal elements are present in fan behavior?* The study confirmed the presence of all four tribal elements—rituals, symbols, sacred places, and identity values—among SCP fans. These were evidenced by behaviors such as attending matches (83.2%), wearing club merchandise (51.5%), and valuing symbolic assets like the stadium and anthem. This supports Maffesoli's (1996) concept of neo-tribes and corroborates findings by Teixeira (2017) and Carvalho (2020), affirming that SCP fans form a culturally embedded and emotionally cohesive community.

According to RQ3: *What tribal potential do fans exhibit during a crisis?* While fans maintained high levels of content consumption (84.8%), their active engagement and eWOM (electronic word-of-mouth) behaviors declined during crises. This divergence between passive loyalty and active promotion reflects Kozinets' (1999) assertion that online community behavior is context-dependent. Fans were more inclined to defend the club than to promote it, indicating a shift from promotional to protective tribal behavior. Moreover, while high-cost purchases like the Gamebox saw reduced interest, lower-cost items such as merchandise and tickets retained appeal, suggesting that symbolic consumption persists even in adverse contexts (Cova & Cova, 2002).

According to RQ4: *What role do digital marketing strategies play during a sports crisis?* The study suggests that digital marketing was found to play a supportive but limited role. While SCP employed loyalty-building tactics—such as exclusive content and interactive experiences—fan interaction remained subdued. This supports Kaplan & Haenlein's (2010) view that digital engagement is highly

context-sensitive. The club's strategic reduction in communication during crises reflects an understanding of fan receptivity and emotional fatigue. Ultimately, the findings reinforce Richardson's (2012) argument that fan communities operate with emotional autonomy, often beyond the reach of conventional marketing strategies.

The data confirmed the presence of all four tribal elements: rituals, symbols, sacred places, and identity values. These were evidenced by high frequencies in behavior such as watching matches regularly, wearing club merchandise, and valuing key symbols like the stadium and anthem. This supports Maffesoli's (1996) concept of "neo-tribes," which emphasizes shared emotions and symbolic practices. SCP fans demonstrate ritualistic behaviors that go beyond match results and reflect a deeply embedded cultural identity. This tribal structure reinforces resilience, even when collective emotions fluctuate during crises.

The majority of respondents associate a "sporting crisis" with underperformance (e.g., lower-than-expected league positions), financial instability, and management controversies. These findings align with literature suggesting that sports fans are highly sensitive to performance-related issues (Bauer et al., 2008). Such crises undermine the emotional and symbolic connection fans hold with their clubs, reinforcing the view that fan identity is strongly intertwined with club success (Tapp & Clowes, 2002). Importantly, netnographic data showed a behavioral shift during the "negative week," marked by reduced engagement and enthusiasm both from the club and its fans. This highlights how crises not only affect perception but also disrupt the digital rituals and engagement patterns that normally sustain fan communities.

Although fans demonstrated tribal behaviors, their interaction with club content during crises was often passive. While they continued consuming digital content (84.8%), their willingness to engage or recommend the club (eWOM) declined. This contrast between consumption and interaction supports Kozinets' (1999) idea that online communities express loyalty differently depending on context. Fans became brand defenders more than promoters, showing up in moments of external criticism rather than through active engagement. Thus, tribal potential is manifested in advocacy and continued symbolic alignment, but not necessarily through digital interaction or purchasing behavior. However, moderate purchase intentions, especially regarding affordable items like merchandise or match tickets, demonstrate that symbolic and identity-related consumption persists even in uncertain contexts, reinforcing the consumer tribe's economic potential (Cova & Cova, 2002).

Digital marketing plays a vital yet limited role during crises. The club's actions focused on loyalty reinforcement (e.g., promotions and exclusive content) and trust-building communication, but

interaction declined. SCP's decision to reduce activity during a crisis may be interpreted as a strategic acknowledgment of fan receptivity.

While digital marketing can create engagement and facilitate emotional connections in normal circumstances (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), its effectiveness is heavily context-dependent. The findings suggest that tribal emotion overpowers strategic messaging during crises, a conclusion that supports studies emphasizing the emotional autonomy of fan communities (Richardson, 2012).

In summary, the study reveals that tribal fan behavior persists during crises, but its expression shifts from visible engagement to symbolic loyalty and silent consumption. Crises alter not just perceptions but the ways in which fans interact with digital spaces and brand messages. Digital marketing can support emotional continuity, but it cannot fully mitigate the effects of performance-related disillusionment. The findings reinforce that fan communities are emotionally driven tribes, and marketing strategies must adapt to these fluctuations rather than resist them.

In summary, the study reveals that tribal fan behavior persists during crises, but its expression shifts from visible engagement to symbolic loyalty and silent consumption. Crises alter not just perceptions but the ways in which fans interact with digital spaces and brand messages.

Digital marketing can support emotional continuity, but it cannot fully mitigate the effects of performance-related disillusionment. The findings reinforce that fan communities are emotionally driven tribes, and marketing strategies must adapt to these fluctuations rather than resist them.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated the interplay between tribal behavior, digital marketing, and fan perception during a sports crisis, using Sporting Club of Portugal (SCP) as a case study. The findings confirm that fan communities exhibit strong tribal characteristics—rituals, symbols, sacred places, and identity values—which persist even during organizational crises. However, the expression of these behaviors shifts: while symbolic loyalty and passive content consumption remain high, active engagement and digital advocacy decline during negative events.

Digital marketing strategies, although useful for reinforcing long-term loyalty, are limited in their ability to counteract the emotional impact of a crisis. The study highlights that emotional resonance, rather than strategic messaging, primarily drives fan behavior in turbulent times. This underscores the need for adaptive, emotionally intelligent marketing approaches that align with the fluctuating sentiments of fan communities. The research contributes to academic discourse by applying consumer tribe theory to the digital sports context, offering a framework for understanding online fan behavior

during crises. It also provides managerial insights into the importance of authentic communication and emotional connection in sustaining fan loyalty.

This study offers an initial contribution to understanding how crises unfold within the digital sports environment, highlighting the need for further research to deepen knowledge about fan behavior in contexts marked by uncertainty and instability. Despite its contributions, the study is limited by its single-case design, national scope, and non-probabilistic sampling. Future research should explore comparative, cross-sport, and international contexts to deepen understanding of digital tribalism and its implications for crisis management in sports.

REFERENCES

Almeida, H. M. R., Simões, D., Silva, C., & Bem-Haja, P. (2017). Marketing Tribal: Adaptação Portuguesa e Características Psicométricas Preliminares do Questionário de Tribalismo, Lealdade Marca-Equipa, Valor Marca e Identidade Pessoal/Grupo. *Espacios*, 38(29), 3186–3191.

Asada, A., Ko, Y. J., & Jang, W. (. (2020). Effects of Relative Size and Homogeneity of Sports Fan Community on Potential Fans' Support Intentions. *Journal of Sport Management*, 34(2), 103-119. doi.org/10.1123/jsm.2019-0055

Ashley, C., & Tuten, T. (2015). Creative strategies in social media marketing: An exploratory study of branded social content and consumer engagement. *Psychology & Marketing*, 32(1), 15–27. https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.20761

Banister, E. N., & Hogg, M. K. (2004). Negative Symbolic Consumption and Consumers' Drive for Self-Esteem: The Case of the Fashion Industry. *European Journal of Marketing*, 38(7), 850–868. https://doi.org/10.1108/03090560410539285

Bartošová, K., Burešová, I., Valcová, A., & Ondráčková Dacerová, V. (2017). Rituals in Sports. *Kinesiologia Slovenica*, 23(1), 5–13.

Behlau, D., Gieß-Stüber, P., & Heinemann, K. (2024). Crisis in sports: Multilevel perspectives and management approaches. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 48(1), 12–29. https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723524123456

Biscaia, R., Correia, A., Rosado, A., Ross, S., & Maroco, J. (2012). The Effects of Emotions on Football Spectators' Satisfaction and Behavioral Intentions. *European Sport Management* Quarterly, 12(3), 227–242. https://doi.org/10.1080/16184742.2012.679949

Biscaia, R., Correia, A., Ross, S., Rosado, A., & Maroco, J. (2013). Spectator-Based Brand Equity in Professional Soccer. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 22(1), 20–32.

Bouchet, P., Bodet, G., Bernache-Assollant, I., & Kada, F. (2011). Segmenting Sport Spectators: Construction and Preliminary Validation of the Sporting Event Experience Search (SEES) Scale. *Sport Management Review*, 14(1), 42–53. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2010.02.001

Bruce, T., & Tini, T. (2008). Unique Crisis Response Strategies in Sports Public Relations: Rugby League and The Case for Diversion. *Public Relations Review*, 34(2), 108–115. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2008.03.015

Campos, M. S. P. (2019). O impacto das redes sociais no marketing desportivo: O caso do Instagram na Adidas [Master's thesis, Universidade Lusófona].

Carvalho, F. C. de F. M. de. (2020). Marketing Tribal: O impacto da identificação com a equipa no comportamento do consumidor de futebol [MasterThesis]. https://comum.rcaap.pt/handle/10400.26/33548?locale=en

Coffin, J., Cova, B., & Shankar, A. (2023). Introduction to the Special Section: Tribal Marketing after Covid. *Marketing Theory*, 23(2), 267–273. https://doi.org/10.1177/14705931231153119

Collins, R. (2004). *Interaction Ritual Chains* (2o). Princeton University Press.

Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, J. S. (2012). The paracrisis: The challenges created by publicly managing crisis prevention. *Public Relations Review*, 38(3), 408–415. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2012.04.004

Costa, A. (2010). *A Sociologia do Desporto e Novas Perspectivas para a Sociologia Geral. O caso do Futebol* (4o). Grácio Editor/CECS.

Cova, B., & Cova, V. (2002). Tribal marketing: The tribalisation of society and its impact on the conduct of marketing. *European Journal of Marketing*, 36(5/6), 595–620. https://doi.org/10.1108/03090560210423023

Cova, B. (1997). Community and Consumption: Towards a Definition of the "Linking Value" of Product or Services. *European Journal of Marketing*, 31(3–4), 297–316. https://doi.org/10.1108/03090569710162380

Dass, S., Sethi, R., Popli, S. & Saxena, V. (2021). Drivers of Brand Engagement: The Role of Brand Communities. *Global Business Review*, 22(5). https://doi.org/10.1177/0972150919825516

Dionísio, P., Leal, C., & Moutinho, L. (2008). Fandom affiliation and tribal behaviour: A sports marketing application. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 11(1), 17–39. https://doi.org/10.1108/13522750810845531

Dholakia, U., Bagozzi, R., & Pearo, L. (2004). A Social Influence Model of Consumer Participation in Network- and Small-Group-Based Virtual Communities. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 21(1), 241–263. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijresmar.2003.12.004

Ellis, R. (2019). Sporting Space, Sacred Space: A Theology of Sporting Place. *Religions*, 10(8), 473. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10080473

Edwards, A., & Usher, W. (2010). Crisis Communication and Sport Public Relations. Em M. Hopwood, J. Skinner, & P. Kitchin (Eds.), *Sport Public Relations and Communication* (pp. 123–138). Elsevier.

Fearn-Banks, K. (2016*). Crisis Communications: A Casebook Approach* (5o). Routledge.

Ferié, J. (2020). Digital marketing: Concepts and practices in the digital age. *Journal of Marketing Perspective*s, 12(3), 45–58.

Fulconis, F., & Pache, G. (2014). Football Passion as a Religion: The Four Dimensions of a Sacred Experience. *Society and Business Review*, 9(2), 166–185. https://doi.org/10.1108/SBR-09-2013-0064

Galvão, C., Pluye, P., & Ricarte, I. (2017). Métodos de Pesquisa Mistos e Revisões de Literatura Mistas: Conceitos, Construção e Critérios de Avaliação. *Revista de Ciência da Informação e Documentação,* 8(2), 4–24. https://doi.org/10.11606/issn.2178-2075.v8i2p4-24

Garcia, H., & Doorley, J. (2020). *Reputation management: The key to successful public relations and corporate communication* (4th ed.). Routledge.

Genchev, S. E., Gray, G., & Wert-Gray, S. (2021). Male and Female Sports Fans: Team Identification, Satisfaction With Team Performance, and Consumption Behavior. *Journal of Marketing Development and Competitiveness*, 15(2), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.33423/jmdc.v15i2.4329

Gray, G. T., & Wert-Gray, S. (2012). Customer Retention in Sports Organization Marketing: Examining the Impact of Team Identification and Satisfaction with Team Performance. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 36(3), 275–281. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1470-6431.2011.00999.x

Harker, J. L. (2021). Let's Talk Sports: An Egocentric Discussion Network Analysis Regarding NFL Crisis Perceptions: Communication and sport, 9(4). https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479519875970

Hennig-Thurau, T., Gwinner, K. P., Walsh, G., & Gremler, D. D. (2004). Electronic Word-of-Mouth via Consumer Opinion Platforms: What Motivates Consumers to Articulate themselves on the Internet? *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 18(1), 38–52. https://doi.org/10.1002/dir.10073

Hunziker, S., & Blankenagel, M. (2021). *Research design in business and management: A practical guide for students and researchers*. Springer.

Huettermann, M., Uhrich, S., & Koenigstorfer, J. (2022). Components and Outcomes of Fan Engagement in Team Sports: The Perspective of Managers and Fans. *Journal of Global Sport Management*, 7(4), 447–478. https://doi.org/10.1080/24704067.2019.1576143

IJAR. (2019). Digital marketing: A modern approach to consumer engagement. *International Journal of Advanced Research*, 7(4), 112–118. https://doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/12345

Janssen, C., Sen, S., & Bhattacharya, C. (2015). Corporate Crises in the Age of Corporate Social Responsibility. *Business Horizons*, 58(2), 183–192. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2014.11.002

Kapferer, J. N. (2008). *The new strategic brand management: Creating and sustaining brand equity long term* (4th ed.). Kogan Page.

Katz, M., Baker, T. A., & Du, H. (2020). Team Identity, Supporter Club Identity, and Fan Relationships: A Brand Community Network Analysis of a Soccer Supporters Club. *Journal of Sport Management,* 34(1), 9–21. https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.2018-0344

Kim, J., Kang, S., & Lee, K. H. (2021). Evolution of Digital Marketing Communication: Bibliometric Analysis and Network Visualization from Key Articles. *Journal of Business Research*, 130, 552–563. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.09.043

Knijnik, J., & Newson, M. (2020). 'Tribalism', identity fusion and football fandom in Australia: The case of Western Sydney. *Soccer & Society*,22(1-2), 1-18. https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2020.1802254

Kotler, P. (2017). *Marketing 4.0: Moving from traditional to digital*. Wiley.

Kozinets, R. V. (1999). E-tribalized marketing? The strategic implications of virtual communities of consumption. *European Management Journal*, 17(3), 252–264. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0263-2373(99)00004-3

Kozinets, Robert V. (forthcoming) (2015). *Management Netnography: The Art andScience of Online Cultural Business Research, The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Business and Management Research Methods*, London: SAGE

Kozinets, R. (2018). Netnography for Management and Business Research. *Methods and Challenges*, 2, 384–397. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526430236

Kozinets, R. (2020). *Netnography: The Essential Guide to Qualitative Social Media* Research (3o). Sage Publications.

Kumar, V. (2021). Religion as a System of Symbols: An Interpretation. *International Journal of Arts, Humanities And Social Studies*, 3(6), None-None.

LeBlanc, L. J. (2023). Crisisology: The science of managing crises in a complex world. *Crisis Management Review*, 5(1), 1–20.

Levental, G. (2023). Online sports fan communities: Humor, trivia, and anti-modernity in digital fandom. *Journal of Fandom Studies*, 11(2), 145–162. https://doi.org/10.1386/jfs_00045_1

Lim, C. H., & Brown-Devlin, N. (2021). Crisis communication in sports: Examining the role of social media. *Communication & Sport*, 9(3), 456–478. https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479520934866

Lou, L., Jiao, Y. & Koh, J. (2021). Determinants of Fan Engagement in Social Media-Based Brand Communities: A Brand Relationship Quality Perspective. *Sustainability*, 13. https://doi.org/10.3390/su13116117

Luecke, R., & Barton, L. (2004). *Crisis management: Master the skills to prevent disasters*. Harvard Business Essentials. Harvard Business School Press.

Maffesoli, M. (1996). *The time of the tribes: The decline of individualism in mass society*. Sage.

Maranise, A. (2013). Superstition & Religious Ritual: An Examination of their Effects and Utilization in Sport. *Sport Psychologist*, 27(1), 83–91. https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.27.1.83

Muharam, F. (2024). Digital marketing in sports: A post-pandemic perspective. *Journal of Sport Management and Marketing*, 18(1), 22–39.

Muharam, H., Wandrial, S., Rumondang, P. R., Handayani, M. A. & Masruchan, M. (2024). Innovative Strategies in Digital Marketing: Enhancing Consumer Engagement and Brand Loyalty. *Global International Journal of Innovative Research*. https://doi.org/10.59613/global.v2i7.236

Murphy, S., Hill, T., McDonagh, P., & Flaherty, A. (2023). Mundane Emotions: Losing Yourself in Boredom, Time and Technology. *Marketing Theory*, 23(2), 275–293. https://doi.org/10.1177/14705931221138617

Pandey, A. (2024). Digital marketing: Innovation, integration, and inclusion in the digital age. *Journal of Digital Business Strategy*, 18(1), 22–35.

Pontes, N., Pontes, V., Jin, H. S., & Mahar, C. (2020). The Role of Team Identification on the Sponsorship Articulation Fit Relationship. *Journal of Sport Management*, 35(2), 117–129. https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.2019-0401

Pöppel, K. (2024). Real-time crisis communication in the digital age: Lessons from sports organizations. *International Journal of Crisis Communication*, 12(1), 1–15.

Prakriti, J., & Yadav, N. (2019). Social Media And Youth Subculture: A Sociological Study. IIS University J.S.S, 7(8), 146–162.

Ratten, V. and Thompson, A.-J. (2021), *Digital Sport Marketing*, Thaichon, P. and Ratten, V. (Ed.) Developing Digital Marketing, Emerald Publishing Limited, Leeds, pp. 75-86.

Richardson, B. (2013). *Tribal marketing, tribal branding: An expert guide to the brand co-creation* process. Palgrave Macmillan.

Richardson, B. (2012). Tribal marketing, group membership and brand loyalty. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 11(4), 252–264. https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.1371

Rodríguez, E. (2017). Lineamientos Teóricos y Metodológicos de la Investigación Cuantitativa en Ciencias Sociales. In *Crescendo*, 8(1), 115. https://doi.org/10.21895/incres.2017.v8n1.11

Rook, D. (2007). Dimensão Ritual do Comportamento de Consumo. *Revista de Administração de Empresas*, 47(1), 81–98. https://doi.org/10.1590/S0034-75902007000100013

Santos, T., Almeida, H., & Silva, C. (2018). Fan engagement in sports marketing: A digital perspective. *Revista Portuguesa de Marketing*, 22(3), 45–60.

Sarmento, P. (2021). Crises... E a sua Gestão. Crónicas COVID-19: Gestão do Desporto em Tempos de Crise, 1, 56–58. https://doi.org/10.26619/978-989-9002-16-6.16

Seabra, D., & Rodrigues, J. (1998). Futebol como um Ritual. Antropológicas, 2, 15–34.

Sierra, J. J., & Taute, H. A. (2019). Brand tribalism in technology and sport: Determinants and outcomes. *Journal of Brand Management*, 26, 209-225.

Silva, S., & Santos, M. (2012). How to capitalize on a tribe. *The Marketing Review*, 12(4), 419–436. https://doi.org/10.1362/146934712X13469451716718

Smith, A. C. T., Stavros, C., & Westberg, K. (2017). Connected Communities: Icons and Tribalism (pp. 89–124). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-48854-7_4

Schwarz, S., Aufschnaiter, C., & Hemetsberger, A. (2023). Social Linking Practices Across Physical Distance: The Material Constitution of Sociality. *Marketing Theory*, 23(2), 321–342. https://doi.org/10.1177/14705931221137732

Thabane, L., Thomas, T., Ye, C., & Paul, J. (2009). Posing the Research Question: Not so Simple. Canadian Journal of Anaesthesia, 56(1), 71–79. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12630-008-9007-4

Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (2004). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. In J. T. Jost & J. Sidanius (Eds.), Political psychology: Key readings (pp. 276–293). Psychology Press.

Teixeira, A. R. (2017). Marketing tribal: O comportamento do consumidor desportivo – Caso do Sporting Clube de Portugal [Master's thesis, Universidade de Coimbra].

Tsai, W.-H. S., & Men, L. R. (2013). Motivations and Antecedents of Consumer Engagement With Brand Pages on Social Networking Sites. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 13(2), 76–87. https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2013.826549

Usman, M. E., Otu, T. M., Olumba, M. O., Ohuruogu, B. N., Ngwakwe, P. C., Amuche, O. S., Okechukwu, A. C., & Onuenyim, N. (2022). Crisis Management in Sports and Sports Development. *European Journal of Physical Education and Sport Science*, 8(6), 95–110. https://doi.org/10.46827/ejpe.v8i6.4445

Veloutsou, C. (2011). Examining the link between brand relationships and tribal behaviour: A structural model. *Journal of Business Research*, 64(10), 1044–1051. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2010.11.021

Vivek, S., Beatty, S., & Morgan, R. (2012). Customer Engagement: Exploring Customer Relationships Beyond Purchase. *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, 20(2), 127–145. https://doi.org/10.2753/MTP1069-6679200201

Von Scheve, C., Beyer, M., Ismer, S., Kozłowska, M., & Morawetz, C. (2014). Emotional entrainment, national symbols, and identification: A naturalistic study around the men's football World Cup. *Current Sociology*, 62(1), 3-23.

Wann, D. L., Schrader, M. P., & Wilson, A. M. (1999). Sport fan motivation: Questionnaire validation, comparisons by sport, and relationship to athletic motivation. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 22(1), 114–116.

Wann, D., Dunham, M., Byrd, M., & Keenan, B. (2004). The Five-Factor Model of Personality and the Psychological Health of Highly Identified Sport Fans. *International Sports Journal*, 8(2), 28–36.

Wann, D. (2006). Understanding the Positive Social Psychological Benefits of Sport Team Identification: The Team Identification-Social Psychological Health Model. Group Dynamics: *Theory, Research, and Practice*, 10(4), 272–296. https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2699.10.4.272

Wann, D., Grieve, F., Zapalac, R., & Pease, D. (2008). Motivational Profiles of Sport Fans of Different Sports. Sport Marketing Quarterly, 17.

Wickstrom, A., Denny, I., & Hietanen, J. (2021). "Something is Missing": Melancholia and Belonging in Collective Consumption. *Marketing Theory*, 21(1), 75–92. https://doi.org/10.1177/1470593120937340

Yoshida, M, Biscaia, R, Uhrich, S, Gordon, BS, Huettermann, M & Nakazawa, M 2024, 'Fan Engagement Behavior: Validation of a Theory-Based Scale', *Journal of Sport Management*, vol. 38, no. 2, pp. 133-150. https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.2023-0075

Zolotukhin, V., Zolotukhina, N., Sedina, N., & Kozyreva, M. (2020). Socio-cultural and Legal Aspects of Interaction between Representatives of Different Subcultures in the Media Space. KnE Social Sciences, 227–234. https://doi.org/10.18502/kss.v4i2.6338

Zuckerman, E., Rajendra-Nicolucci, C., Douek, E., & Ong, J. (2021). New directions in social media research. *Reimagine the Internet*, 1, 24–37. https://doi.org/10.7916/fbp8-v297

How to cite this article: