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Exploring U.S. Sports Marketing Strategies for Maximizing a Fluid Fan Base

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Walden University

College of Management and Human Potential

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Dylan Houseworth

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Walden University
2025

Abstract

Exploring U.S. Sports Marketing Strategies for Maximizing a Fluid Fan Base

by

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MA, High Point University, 2020

BSBA, High Point University, 2019

Research Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

December 2025

Abstract

Fluid fandom, characterized by consumers' shifting allegiances across players, teams, and organizations, has become increasingly prevalent within the U.S. sports marketplace. Many U.S. sports marketing managers lack clearly defined, evidence-based strategies for effectively engaging fluid fans, creating uncertainty around how to maintain brand loyalty, competitive positioning, and long-term organizational viability. Grounded in Stryker's identity theory, the purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was to explore the strategies U.S. sports marketing managers use to engage and maximize a fluid fan base. A purposeful sampling of six sports marketing professionals from U.S.-based organizations was selected, with each participant required to have a minimum of five years of experience in fan engagement and digital marketing strategy. Data were collected through semistructured interviews and supporting public documentation, then analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis method. Three themes emerged: grounding fluid fandom in regional identity, leveraging player-centric content to build loyalty, and deploying platform-specific and globally adaptive social media strategies. A key recommendation is for organizations to design personalized, identity-aware content campaigns that use athlete narratives, community connection, and platform targeting to build sustained engagement. The implications for positive social change include the potential for helping sports organizations cultivate inclusive, culturally resonant fan ecosystems that strengthen engagement within local communities while simultaneously expanding their global presence and market impact.

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Dedication

I dedicate this paper to my family that made me the crazy sports fan that I am today. From the summer little league games and watching UConn basketball, to going to Fenway Park and Heinz Field as a kid, these formattable moments helped decide my career path, and for that, I am forever grateful.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my committee members for their patience and guidance through a difficult and unique doctoral study such as this one. The proper methods and techniques came from the lessons and materials provided, helping me to complete this project.

Table of Contents

List of Tables	iii
Section 1: Foundation of the Project.....	1
Background of the Problem	1
Business Problem Focus and Project Purpose	2
Research Question	2
Assumptions and Limitations	3
Assumptions.....	3
Limitations	4
Transition	5
Section 2: The Literature Review	6
A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature.....	6
Application to the Applied Business Problem	7
Transition	33
Section 3: Research Project Methodology	35
Project Ethics	35
Nature of the Project	38
Population, Sampling, and Participants	39
Data Collection Activities.....	41
Interview Questions	43
Data Organization and Analysis Techniques.....	45
Data Analysis	45

Reliability and Validity.....	49
Reliability.....	49
Validity	50
Transition and Summary.....	52
Section 4: Findings and Conclusions.....	54
Presentation of the Findings.....	54
Theme 1: Grounding Fluid Fandom in Regional Identity	55
Theme 2: Player-Centric Content Strategy for a Fluid Fan Base	79
Theme 3: Strategic Use of Social Media and Global Expansion.....	97
Business Contributions and Recommendations for Professional Practice	115
Recommendations Based on Theme 1	115
Recommendations Based on Theme 2	117
Recommendations Based on Theme 3	119
Implications for Social Change.....	121
Recommendations for Future Research	123
Conclusions.....	126
References.....	128
Appendix A: Informed Consent Form	156
Appendix B: Participant Invitation Letter.....	157
Appendix C: Interview Protocol	158

List of Tables

Table 1 *Interview Questions' Alignment to Proposal Components*..... 44

Section 1: Foundation of the Project

Background of the Problem

The emergence of fluid fans is presenting challenges for U.S. sports marketing professionals. The current traditional categorization of sports fans has yet to integrate the impact of technology (Yang & Cole, 2022). Communication channels opened by recent technology led to the emergence of a new type of fan known as the fluid fan (Baker, 2022). A fluid fan has three distinct characteristics that differentiate them from traditional fans: they are open to change, feel empowered to make choices, and continuously evolve (Ruggiero, 2019). Traditional fans are more inclined to remain loyal to their chosen teams for life regardless of outside factors that may deter them from their loyalty (Harasta, 2021). While sports fans broadly identify personally and socially with teams and players they support, it is human nature to want to change perceived identities (Vale & Fernandes, 2018), especially in social settings (Spears, 2021). This desire for change creates many opportunities for franchises to gain new fans and consumers.

The emergence of technology enhances connections between sports franchises and fans. Traditional sports consumption methods involve prioritizing the televising of local teams (Vamplew, 2022). Internet communities and social media channels allow viewers to watch various forms of entertainment, including games that are different from those traditionally shown to a local demographic (Riley, 2020). Fluid fans may not form a sports identity or affiliation with one particular team, presenting a challenge to U.S. sports marketing professionals (Mansfield et al., 2020). Fluid fans' changing loyalty presents a possibility for competitive advantage if properly identified and addressed.

Business Problem Focus and Project Purpose

The specific business problem is that some U.S. professional sports marketing managers lack successful strategies to maximize the fluid fan base to potentially gain revenue and remain competitive. The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry is to explore the strategies some U.S. sports marketing managers use to maximize a fluid fan base. The target population included sports franchise marketing managers who met the following inclusion criteria: (a) located in the Eastern United States, (b) have at least 5 years of experience marketing to sports fans, and (c) have successfully designed marketing strategies for maximizing a fluid fan base. The participants comprised six U.S. sports marketing managers who met the study's inclusion criteria. I identified participants through purposeful recruitment using social media. I engaged with participants using semistructured interviews containing open-ended interview questions. I also used publicly available company information, including social media pages, as a data source in the study. The theory guiding this study was Stryker's (1980) identity theory. Identity theory posits that individuals' roles and identities within a social structure shape their behaviors and interactions (Stryker, 1980). Identity theory helped me understand how U.S. sports marketing professionals adjust marketing strategies to fluid fans' behaviors and interactions.

Research Question

The research question guiding this study was: What strategies do U.S. sports marketing managers use to maximize the fluid fan base to potentially gain revenue and remain competitive?

Assumptions and Limitations

Assumptions

Researchers should be aware of the assumptions underlying their studies.

Assumptions are facts that researchers consider true without explicit verification (Adler, 2022). The study has epistemological assumptions. Epistemological assumptions concern the nature and scope of knowledge, as well as the researcher's relationship to the subject being researched (Norwich, 2020). Qualitative research stems from the constructivist paradigm, which assumes that reality is intangible and is not fixed (Pilarska, 2021). In this study, I will investigate participants' perceptions of successful implementation strategies for succession planning. Consequently, an epistemological assumption of this study is that there are multiple realities regarding successful succession planning strategies, which I will assess through the participants' perceptions and experiences. This assumption is consistent with constructivism.

The study also contains several methodological assumptions. First, I will assume that the participants answer the screening questions truthfully regarding their qualifications for the study. This assumption is necessary to ensure the participants have the requisite knowledge to identify successful strategies for implementing formal succession planning. A second methodological assumption is that the participants will answer the interview questions truthfully. This assumption is reasonable because participation in the study is voluntary, and the participants will have no reason to be untruthful. A third methodological assumption is that participants can accurately assess the success of their succession planning strategies even if the actual leadership transition

has not yet occurred. This assumption recognizes that succession planning success can be measured through intermediate indicators such as successor readiness, stakeholder buy-in, and plan comprehensiveness rather than requiring a completed generational transfer.

Limitations

All research studies have limitations that may impact the study's findings. Limitations are weaknesses that stem from the study's methodology, over which the researcher has no control (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). The first limitation stemmed from the concept of fluid fandom being relatively new, and marketing managers have little experience addressing this demographic of fans (Ruggiero, 2019). I found it challenging to secure interviews based on the small pool of qualified interviewees available, who were high-ranking U.S. sports marketing professionals with sufficient knowledge about fluid fandom. To mitigate this limitation, a broad geographical location was chosen to maximize the possibility of finding at least six participants. A second limitation was that marketing managers may not want to participate in the study due to the fear of sharing trade secrets in the study's findings. To mitigate this limitation, I informed participants that I would keep their identities and the identities of their organizations confidential and de-identified in the study's findings. Third, the seasonal nature of sports may have influenced marketing managers' availability (Melo et al., 2020). I mitigated this limitation by seeking site agreements early in the doctoral project process, providing potential participants with sufficient notice regarding the project's timing.

Transition

Section 1 introduced fluid fandom and the challenges associated with marketing franchise loyalty to this emerging and evolving classification of sports fans. I address the specific business problem of some U.S. professional sports marketing managers lacking successful strategies to maximize the fluid fan base through a qualitative pragmatic inquiry exploring the methods that some U.S. sports marketing managers use to successfully maximize the fluid fan base. I also presented the study's research question, assumptions, and limitations in Section 1. Section 2 reviews the professional and academic literature surrounding fluid fandom and sports marketing strategies. Section 3 describes the study's specific methodology for participant recruitment and selection, as well as data collection, organization, and analysis. Section 4 presents the study's findings and discusses implications for business practice and positive social change. Section 4 also contains recommendations for practice and future research.

Section 2: The Literature Review

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The following section contains a review of the literature for this research study. This review provides insight into scholars' studies on marketing strategies for traditional fans and how marketing managers adapt these strategies to maximize a fluid fan base. My study includes 138 references, of which 124 (90%) were from peer-reviewed sources, and 135 (98%) were published between 2020-2024. The literature review contains 128 references, of which peer-reviewed sources comprise 112 (88%), and 125 (98%) were published within 5 years of my expected graduation. The references include dissertations, journal articles, and books.

The literature review is organized into five main sections. First, I describe the study's conceptual framework and identity theory, discussing how this theory applies to understanding fluid fans. Next, I discuss the evolution of U.S. sports marketing, discussing traditional marketing, and how the internet revolutionized sports marketing (Mosiara, 2023; Varmus et al., 2021). Third, I discuss the emergence of fluid fans and their characteristics (Huettermann & Kunkel, 2022; Sports Innovation Lab, 2020). Fourth, I describe mechanisms of marketing to fluid fans, including enhancing fan experiences (Jiaqi Xu et al., 2019), innovative ticketing strategies (Ennis & Ennis, 2020), and media and promotional activities that allow sports franchises to maximize a fluid fan base (Karg & Funk, 2020). In the fifth section, I evaluate how U.S. sports marketing managers can target fluid fans through social media platforms.

Application to the Applied Business Problem

Conceptual Framework

The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry is to explore the strategies some U.S. sports marketing managers use to maximize a fluid fan base. The theory that guides this study is Stryker's (1980) identity theory. Stryker posited that individuals' roles and identities within a social structure shape their behaviors and interactions. The core tenets of identity theory are: (a) individuals develop identities based on their societal roles, (b) these roles dictate behavioral expectations, (c) the prominence of identity (identity salience) influences its prevalence in different contexts, and (d) social structures critically inform identity formation and enactment. This framework allows researchers to understand how individuals navigate and prioritize different roles and identities in various social contexts (Anglin et al., 2022). The central tenets highlight the interaction between societal roles, identity salience, and individual behavior, emphasizing the influence of social structures on identity formation (Stryker, 1980). I used identity theory to understand how fluid fans develop their identities as sports fans.

The first tenet of identity theory is that individuals develop identities based on their societal roles. According to Stryker's (1980) identity theory, individuals possess multiple identities related to their different roles in society. An individual may have many roles: parent, friend, manager, and sports fan. Individuals organize their identities into a hierarchy influenced by an individual's relationships and society (Redhead & Power, 2022). The hierarchy then determines which identity and individual is most likely to activate in different social situations (Abele et al., 2021). The emphasis an individual

places on their social hierarchy dictates which identity they choose to express in different situations.

The second tenet of identity theory is that societal roles dictate behavioral expectations. Each societal role contains a set of expectations that define what behaviors are necessary and appropriate (Abele et al., 2021). Roles are socially constructed and often vary between societies and over time (Eaude, 2024). For example, a parent in 2020 necessarily raises their children differently than a parent in 1960 due to technological advances and changes in societal expectations. Societal norms tend to act as informal rules that govern behavior (Gross & Vostroknutov, 2022). For each role, norms dictate how an individual acts based on laws and regulations and social approval and disapproval (Horne & Mollborn, 2020). Individuals base their behavior on societal roles and norms.

An individual's culture and situational context significantly influence societal expectations and norms, which, in turn, influence an individual's behavior. The expectations of similar roles vary considerably across cultures, influencing how individuals perform roles globally (Sagiv & Schwartz, 2022). Parents' and employees' behaviors in Western countries vary considerably from those in Eastern countries due to different societal norms (He et al., 2021; Knoll et al., 2021). Individuals' behaviors also depend on situational context (Abele et al., 2021). For example, a manager may act differently when engaging with superiors than when working with employees under them. Culture and situational context influence individuals' behavior.

The third tenet of identity theory concerns identity salience. Identity salience refers to the likelihood that an individual will invoke a particular identity in different

situations (Stryker, 1980). Hierarchy of identity and situational and contextual factors influence identity salience (Thoits, 2020). Other factors influence identity salience, including an individual's commitment to a role, emotional and value attachments, and reinforcement and feedback (Charness & Chen, 2020). An individual's commitment to a role influences the salience associated with that role (Stryker, 1980). Greater commitment to a role increases the salience of that identity, and an individual devotes more time, effort, and resources to the identity (Tripathi et al., 2020). Emotional attachments and personal values also influence an individual's salience to a role (Stryker & Serpe, 1982). Identities linked to an individual's core values or identities that enhance their self-esteem are likely to be salient (Markowski & Serpe, 2021). Various factors influence the salience of individuals' different identities.

The fourth tenet of identity theory is that social structures critically inform identity formation and enactment. Social structures influence individuals' identities through social roles and expectations (Stryker, 1980). Social structures define various roles, such as gender, professional, and familial roles, and the behaviors of individuals who occupy those roles (Anglin et al., 2022). Social norms, which are part of social structures, establish behaviors and attitudes that are acceptable for different identities (Charness & Chen, 2020). Institutional influences also inform individuals' identity formation. Educational systems, family structures, religious institutions, and the modern media all contribute to identity formation by imparting beliefs, values, and norms aligning with broader societal expectations (Paglayan, 2022; Scott & Cnaan, 2020). The laws and structure of a society's legal and political systems also influence individuals'

identities by delineating rights, responsibilities, and social status (Bonomi et al., 2021). Different facets of social structures inform individuals' identity formation and enactment.

Application of Identity Theory to Fluid Fans

The first tenet of identity theory is that individuals develop identities based on their societal roles. Fluid fans develop identities heavily influenced by their social roles, particularly within sports fandom (Sports Innovation Lab, 2020). These fans, characterized by their dynamic loyalties and diverse interests, often find their identities shaped and reshaped by the communities on social media (Levental et al., 2023). Platforms like Twitter and Instagram allow fans to express and explore various facets of their sporting interests, often leading to a fluid and ever-evolving sense of self about their favorite sports franchises (Toffoletti et al., 2021). The vast array of content on these platforms facilitates fans' identity formation, allowing fans to connect with aspects of sports culture that resonate with their lives and societal roles.

The second tenet of identity theory is that societal roles dictate behavioral expectations. The shifting social roles of fluid fans dictate behavioral expectations that sports marketing managers must adeptly navigate (Chun & Sagas, 2022). Understanding these roles is pivotal for crafting targeted marketing strategies. Social media serves as a vital tool in this endeavor, offering a window into the preferences and behaviors of these fans (Hussain et al., 2021). Through careful analysis of social media trends and interactions, marketing managers can gain insights into what resonates with different segments of fluid fans (Zeren et al., 2022). This strategy allows marketing managers to effectively tailor their campaigns to meet these evolving expectations.

The third tenet of identity theory concerns the prominence of identity. The identity salience of fluid fans significantly influences the prevalence and nature of their online identities (Sports Innovation Lab, 2020). On social media, fluid fans often curate their presence to reflect their most salient identity, whether as die-hard fans of a specific team or as casual observers of the sport (Fenton et al., 2023). This salience is not static but fluctuates with the dynamic nature of their interests and social interactions online (Wang et al., 2022). As a result, the identities fluid fans enact on platforms like Facebook or TikTok can vary considerably, echoing the fluidity of their fan status and engagement with sports franchises.

The fourth tenet of identity theory is that social structures critically inform identity formation and enactment. Social structures critically inform fluid fans' identity formation and enactment, particularly in online interactions (Gong, 2022). Social media acts as a mirror and a mold for social structures, reflecting existing societal norms and expectations while shaping new forms of fan identity (Cereda, 2023). Fluid fans navigate a complex web of social cues, community norms, and peer interactions through social media engagement, contributing to the continual evolution of their sports-related identities (Watkins, 2018). How fans align with or diverge from traditional sports fan archetypes redefines the meaning of being a supporter in the digital age.

Contrasting Theory: Symbolic Interactionism Theory

A theory that contrasts with identity theory is symbolic interactionism. Blumer (1986) developed symbolic interactionism theory, positing that individuals create and interpret symbols in their social interactions, which form the basis of human

understanding. Symbolic interactionism has seven core tenets. In this section, I describe the seven tenets and discuss how each applies to fluid fans.

Human Society is Constructed Through Interaction. Symbolic interactionism theory indicates that human society is constructed through interactions. Blumer (1986) indicated that human society and social order are not fixed, instead continuously evolving through social interactions. Individuals construct their reality through interaction with language and symbols, which change over time (Elliott, 2020). Fluid fans create and modify their fan identities based on the symbolic meanings they derive from interactions with teams, other fans, social media, and societal trends (Sveinson & Hoeber, 2023). A fan may initially support a team due to the symbolic association of local ties but may shift allegiance based on new interactions on social media that change the symbolic meaning of fandom.

Humans Act Based on Symbolic Meaning. The second tenet of symbolic interactionism theory is that humans act based on symbolic meaning. Individuals act toward things and each other based on their perceived associated meanings (Blumer, 1986). These meanings are derived from social interactions and modified as individuals have new interactions within their environment. Social media is critical for shaping the meanings that fluid fans associate with sports teams (Spracklen, 2022). Fluid fans are active creators of content, allowing them to interpret and reshape their fan narratives due to continued access to new symbolic meanings associated with sports teams.

Meanings are Negotiated. Symbolic interactionism theory emphasizes that individuals use an interpretive process to understand social behaviors. Individuals

interpret and define each other's actions (Blumer, 1986). Individuals act based on the meaning they ascribe to others' behaviors (Malle, 2022). Fluid fans negotiate the meaning of their fandom in social settings (Balliau et al., 2021). Discussions and debates among fans on social media can lead individuals to reevaluate their loyalty to a sports team and negotiate the meaning they associate with a team or sports genre.

Joint Action. The fourth tenet of symbolic interactionism theory is joint action. Blumer (1986) posited that social action results from individuals fitting together multiple lines of individual actions in a process termed *interpretive interaction*. Through interpretive interaction, individuals interpret others' actions and construct their own actions in response (Duffy et al., 2022). Joint action and group dynamics significantly influence the behaviors of fluid fans. Interactions with fan groups can lead to shifts in team loyalty (Yun et al., 2021). If a fan is part of a group that collectively shifts their loyalty to a different sports team, the individual may follow to conform to group norms and meanings.

Agency. The fifth tenet of symbolic interactionism theory is agency. Blumer (1986) posited that individuals are active creators and participants in their actions, creating their own social reality. The concept of agency contrasts with individuals who passively absorb the external influence of society. Blumer (1986) posited that individuals' active roles in social interactions are key to forming the self. Fluid fans exhibit agency in the creation of their fan identities, actively interacting with and creating sports content (Sayilkan et al., 2021). Agency is a key component of fluid fandom.

Self-Concept. The concept of self is critical to symbolic interactionism theory. Blumer (1986) posited that the self develops through social interaction and contains two components: the *I* and the *me*. The *I* is a spontaneous driving force that fosters action and behavior, whereas the *me* is the reflective part of identity that considers social norms and expectations (Blumer, 1986; Spears, 2021). The *I* component of identity allows fluid fans to exercise personal agency and spontaneity when choosing alliances with teams, experimenting with different fan cultures, or blending and creating new forms of fandom. The *me* component is also critical for fluid fans, as fans navigate social interactions within their fan groups (Spracklen, 2022). Fluid fans based their fandom self-concept on the dynamic interaction of the *I* and *me* components of their identities.

Flexible and Fluid Social Processes. The final tenet of symbolic interactionism theory involves the dynamic nature of social processes. Social processes are fluid and adaptable rather than static (Blumer, 1986). Individuals interpret social meanings, definitions, and norms continuously, revising their behavior as they experience new interactions (Shareef et al., 2020). Fluid fans express inherently dynamic fandom, continuously negotiating the meaning of their fandom activities (Rapoport, 2020). Every social interaction between fans can influence a fluid fan's perceptions and behavior, leading to new social interactions and behaviors (Watkins, 2018). Fluid fans are flexible and engage in fluid social processes, consistent with symbolic interactionism theory.

Choosing Identity Theory Over Symbolic Interactionism Theory

Stryker's identity theory and Blumer's symbolic interactionism theory both offer insight into the dynamics of fan behavior. Stryker's (1980) identity theory is better suited

for researching fluid fandom due to the focus on identity salience, role hierarchies, and commitment. Stryker's (1980) theory emphasizes identity salience, which I can use to explore which fan identities an individual chooses. The notion of identity salience is absent from Blumer's (1986) symbolic interactionism theory. Identity salience is one reason why I chose the identity theory of symbolic interactionism theory.

Identity theory also focuses on role hierarchies and individuals' commitment to an identity. Role hierarchies may be important for understanding fluid fans' behaviors on social media and interacting with sports team content (Delia, 2020). Fluid fans' commitment to certain roles and identities could also influence their behavior, in turn requiring sports marketing professionals to change their approaches (Mühlbacher et al., 2022). The focus of identity theory on identity salience, role hierarchies, and commitment makes this framework more appropriate for understanding fluid fandom compared to symbolic interactionism theory.

Evolution of Sports Marketing

Sports franchises evolved their marketing practices with the fans' increasing use of technology. Before the advent of social media, marketing managers of sports franchises took a traditional approach, primarily focusing on developing deep-rooted loyalty among local fanbases (Varmus et al., 2021). This conventional approach involved marketing tactics emphasizing fan engagement through geographical and cultural connections (Coombs, 2021). Traditional sports marketing relied on local television and printed media to capitalize on fans' unwavering allegiance to teams based on family and community connections (Varmus et al., 2021). Before social media became mainstream,

sports marketing managers heavily invested in localized branding, community-centric activities, and tailored messaging that resonated with the local populace, strengthening the bond between local teams and their supporters (Abeza et al., 2020). Traditional sports marketing approaches focused on reaching regional fans and forging community connections.

The advent of the Internet brought about a significant transformation in sports marketing. This digital revolution facilitated global accessibility, allowing fans worldwide to connect with various teams and sports (Kennedy et al., 2022). The Internet eliminated the regional and geographical delimitations of sports fandom (Reifurth et al., 2019). The Internet also enabled the distribution of diverse sports content, reaching a broader and more varied audience (Ramon & Rojas-Torrijos, 2022). The Internet introduced interactive fan engagement through digital platforms, fostering active participation from fans (Kennedy et al., 2022). Another notable change was the emergence of data-driven marketing strategies, utilizing online data to create more personalized and targeted marketing approaches catering to individual fan preferences and behaviors (Mamo et al., 2022). The Internet changed the way that sports franchise managers approached sports marketing.

While the Internet increased fans' access to nonregional sports teams, the advent of social media allowed sports marketing managers to target an even broader consumer base. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram became crucial tools in building global communities, transcending traditional geographical limitations (Mosiara, 2023). Social media platforms also allow the creation of personalized fan

experiences by leveraging user data and enhancing fan loyalty to local and nonregional teams (Wymer et al., 2021). Social media enables real-time fan engagement, helping fans feel more connected to teams and athletes (Vale & Fernandes, 2018). Social media enhanced fans' ability to support sports franchises globally.

Social media was critical in amplifying the reach and visibility of sports brands through influencer marketing. Influencer marketing is a form of social media marketing that utilizes endorsements and product placements from influencers with purported expert knowledge or social influence in their field (Hudders et al., 2021). These influencers, often with a substantial follower base, leverage their online presence to sway public opinion or consumption behavior. In a sports context, athletes, coaches, or sports personalities act as influencers, tapping into their brand to promote sports-related products or services (Lamirán-Palomares et al., 2020). This marketing strategy is particularly effective as it combines the influencers' credibility with a highly engaged audience (Lee, 2021). For instance, a sports shoe brand may collaborate with a renowned athlete, using their endorsement to appeal to a loyal fanbase. This blend of personal branding and influencer reach revolutionized sports marketing, making it a more interactive and personal experience for the consumer.

The emergence of social media also transformed sports marketing through viral content strategies. Viral content strategies are methods employed to create and distribute content that is highly engaging, shareable, and has the potential to spread rapidly online (Denisova, 2023). Unlike traditional marketing, which often relies on consistent messaging and brand exposure, marketing professionals use viral marketing to create

enthusiasm and encourage organic sharing among users (Borges-Tiago et al., 2019). Viral marketing in sports can involve crafting compelling narratives, emotional moments, or awe-inspiring sports feats that naturally attract viewers' attention and prompt them to share with others (Hussain et al., 2021). Viral marketing offers an exponential increase in brand visibility and audience engagement (Krishnan et al., 2022). Viral moments, such as a spectacular goal in soccer or a heartwarming story of an athlete's journey, become more than just content; they transform into shared cultural experiences that resonate with audiences worldwide. This shift to content that organically appeals to emotions and personal connections signifies a new era in how sports brands interact with and captivate their audience.

Emergence of Fluid Fans and Their Characteristics

Changes in sports marketing allowed for the emergence of fluid fans. Fluid fans are a new type of sports enthusiasts who are open to change, empowered to choose, and continuously evolving in their consumption of sports and related content (Sports Innovation Lab, 2020). Huettermann and Kunkel (2022) noted that, unlike traditional fans loyal to a specific team or sport, fluid fans are more flexible in their allegiances and engaging with sports franchises. Fluid fans switch support based on various factors and do not confine themselves to geographical or traditional loyalties (Sports Innovation Lab, 2020). Peng (2022) further explained that digital technologies facilitate this fluidity in fandom, allowing fans to explore and connect with a broader range of sports experiences. Fluid fans are nontraditional sports fans who change their allegiance.

Fluid fandom is a recent shift in sports consumption. The emergence of fluid fans in the sports world is a recent phenomenon driven by the rapid evolution of technology and its integration into the sports experience (Sports Innovation Lab, 2020). This shift from traditional fan engagement models reflects how technological advancements enabled fans to transition seamlessly between various sports consumption and interaction (Smith et al., 2022). Fathy et al. (2021) emphasized that sports organizations now recognize the need to cater to these evolving demands by developing more adaptable and technology-driven strategies. This new age of sports, led by fluid fans, is a dynamic and interactive environment where fans are not passive spectators but active participants in the sports ecosystem.

The defining characteristics of fluid fans include their openness to change, empowerment in their choices, and continuous evolution in their sports-related interests. Huettermann et al. (2019) highlighted that fluid fans leverage technology to enhance their engagement with sports, moving seamlessly between different modes of interaction, including watching sports, betting on outcomes, analyzing team data, or creating sports-based content. Pradhan et al. (2019) argued that this new fan archetype challenges traditional sports marketing and fan engagement methods, requiring a shift towards behavior-focused strategies and technology-enabled experiences. Yun et al. (2020) concluded that sports organizations should adapt to this changing landscape by embracing innovative technologies and approaches that align with the dynamic nature of fluid fans. Sports marketing managers should understand the characteristics of fluid fans in order to market sports franchises effectively.

In light of the evolving landscape of sports fandom, marketing managers must adapt traditional sports marketing and fan engagement methods. Marketing adaptation involves a pivot towards behavior-focused strategies keenly attuned to modern fans' dynamic and diverse preferences (Watanabe et al., 2021). Sports marketing managers should use data analytics to gain insights into fan behaviors, preferences, and patterns (Mamo et al., 2022). For instance, marketing managers personalize marketing messages using data-driven approaches, tailoring experiences to individual fan segments and predicting future fan behaviors (Watanabe et al., 2021). Additionally, leveraging technology-enabled experiences is crucial, including integrating augmented reality and virtual reality into fan experiences; these technologies offer immersive and interactive engagements that extend beyond the physical confines of the sport (Miah et al., 2020; Sawan et al., 2020). Sports franchises can use social media platforms more interactively, encouraging fan-generated content and fostering community (He & Li, 2023). These strategies cater to contemporary sports fans' digital-native expectations and ensure a deeper, more meaningful connection between the sports franchise and its audience.

Sports organizations must adapt to the evolving fan landscape by strategically using social media platforms. Sports marketing managers should create dynamic and interactive content that resonates with the fluid preferences of modern fans (Dees et al., 2022). One practical approach is leveraging real-time engagement on social media during live events, such as hosting live Instagram Q&A sessions with athletes or X (formally known as Twitter) during pre-game preparations (Zakerian et al., 2022). Another innovation is using TikTok and short-form videos to capture youthful, energetic aspects

of sports culture, providing quick and entertaining insights into the lives of athletes and game highlights (Su et al., 2020). Additionally, harnessing user-generated content is a powerful tool for fan engagement; encouraging fans to share their sports experiences and stories builds a more engaged and active community (Wymer et al., 2021). Implementing interactive features like polls, quizzes, and contests on platforms like Facebook and Instagram enhances fan participation (Wymer et al., 2021). These social media strategies ensure that sports organizations stay relevant in an increasingly digital world and effectively cater to the dynamic nature of fluid fans who seek more engaging, personalized, and accessible sports experiences.

Traditional Sports Marketing and Fluid Fans

Sports marketing managers needed to adapt their methods to meet the needs of fluid fans. Traditional sports marketing strategies often fail to reach fluid fans effectively for numerous reasons (Sports Innovation Lab, 2020). First, fluid fans' openness to change clashes with traditional sports marketing approaches, which heavily rely on fostering enduring loyalty to specific teams or players (Brooks, 2023). Traditional sports fans typically exhibit unwavering support, often due to deep-rooted emotional and geographical ties (Varmus et al., 2021). Fluid fans, usually younger and influenced by rapidly evolving digital landscapes, display a propensity for changing allegiances driven by player movements, team performance, or even social and ethical standpoints of sports entities (Sports Innovation Lab, 2020). Traditional sports marketing practices are often ineffective with fluid fans.

Fluid fans seek empowerment through their sports consumption. The empowerment in choice-making exhibited by fluid fans is at odds with traditional sports marketing, which generally focuses on passive consumption patterns (Reddin, 2022). Traditional sports marketing strategies cultivate fan loyalty through sustained engagement, assuming a static fan identity (Wagner, 2023). Fluid fans, however, engage with sports content through diverse and interactive digital platforms, making them more proactive in their consumption choices (Kim, 2021). This dynamic shifts the power from the marketer to the fan, as these fans actively seek content that aligns with their evolving interests and values.

Sports marketing managers experience challenges with fluid fans' fluidity. The continuous evolution of fluid fans' interests and loyalties challenges traditional sports marketing, which often fails to keep pace with the rapidly changing consumer landscape (Karg & Funk, 2020). The conventional sports marketing escalator model, focusing on retaining and converting existing and casual fans to more avid ones (Dees et al., 2022), falls short of addressing the fluidity in fan identity and preference. Fluid fans' identities and loyalties evolve in response to changing social dynamics, technological advancements, and cultural trends, necessitating a more agile and responsive marketing approach (Sports Innovation Lab, 2020). Traditional sports marketing strategies are less effective for fluid fans due to their openness to change, empowerment in choice-making, and continuous evolution. These fans' dynamic identities require sports marketers to adopt more flexible, interactive, and digitally savvy approaches to remain relevant and appealing in the ever-changing sports landscape.

Mechanisms of Marketing to Fluid Fans

I examine ways that sports marketing professionals currently market to fluid fans. Current trends in academic literature indicate that enhancing fan experiences, innovative ticketing strategies, and media and promotional activities allow sports franchises to connect with fluid fans.

Enhancing Fan Experience

Enhancing the fan experience is a cornerstone of traditional sports marketing strategies. This approach involves incorporating dynamic pricing (Jiaqi Xu et al., 2019), customer relationship management (CRM) programs (Annamalai et al., 2021), and improving in-stadium experiences like food and beverage options and tailgating experiences. Dynamic pricing involves setting flexible prices for products or services based on market demands (Arslan et al., 2022). By adjusting ticket prices according to demand, dynamic pricing makes events accessible while maximizing revenue (Baker, 2022). For instance, lowering ticket prices immediately before an event may enhance ticket sales to fluid fans who would not otherwise purchase admission (Ennis & Ennis, 2020). Marketing managers use dynamic pricing to target fans who are uncommitted to a specific team but want to engage in a sports environment (Baker, 2022). Dynamic pricing is one mechanism for engaging fluid fans.

Sports marketing managers can use CRM programs to enhance fluid fans' experiences. CRM programs comprise companies' practices, strategies, and technologies to manage and analyze customer interactions and data (Meena & Sahu, 2021). Annamalai et al. (2021) argued that sports managers can use CRM programs to explore the online

content of social media fans, offering them deals and promotions specific to their monthly, weekly, or even daily interests. CRM programs leverage fan data to tailor experiences, enhancing satisfaction (McDonald et al., 2022). The hospitality industry influences these strategies, emphasizing the importance of treating fans as spectators and valued guests, enhancing their connection to the sport (Cordina et al., 2019). Sports marketers aim to create a personalized and memorable experience for fans that fosters loyalty and encourages repeat patronage and word-of-mouth promotion.

The stadium experience evolved into an integral part of sports marketing. Some stadiums offer diverse culinary experiences catering to individuals with various tastes and dietary needs (Seaman & Franzidis, 2022). Other sports teams offer engaging pre-game tailgating events, which create a festive and inclusive atmosphere (Fuller, 2024). Fluid fans often seek specific experiences rather than invest in specific sports teams (Sports Innovation Lab, 2020). By enhancing events in and outside stadiums, sports marketing managers target fluid fans seeking the stadium experience (Dees et al., 2022). The aim is to transcend beyond the game, making each event an unforgettable social gathering that strengthens the emotional bond between fans and the sports entity.

Innovative Ticketing Strategies

Ticketing strategies are pivotal in traditional sports marketing. Ticketing strategies involve offering a range of ticketing options to cater to different fan segments (Ennis & Ennis, 2020). Season ticketing appeals to traditional sports fans invested in a particular team (Finch et al., 2022). Other types of ticketing, including age-based pricing incentives, may appeal to different kinds of fans (Ennis & Ennis, 2020). For example,

junior executive memberships in private golf courses can offer discounted rates for members below a certain age. This approach attracts younger audiences and makes sporting events more accessible. Flash or emergent online ticket sales may attract fluid fans (Zhang & Mastromartino, 2023). Ticketing strategies are essential for marketing to diverse fans.

Understanding different fan segments' unique expectations and perceptions is essential in crafting ticketing strategies. Fans respond to ticketing strategies that invite them to an experience that resonates with each individual (Ennis & Ennis, 2020). Innovations in ticketing also reflect a broader trend in sports marketing towards inclusivity and diversity, acknowledging that fans are not a monolithic group but rather a spectrum of individuals with varying interests and financial capabilities (Barnhill et al., 2021). Tickets that include stadium experiences, such as autograph signings, are increasing in popularity (Schallhorn et al., 2023). Sports marketers can target fluid fans through unique ticketing experiences.

The impact of ticketing strategies is multifaceted. Innovative ticketing strategies increase sports fans' event attendance (Ennis & Ennis, 2020) and help broaden a team's fan base (Carvalho, 2023). By making sporting events more accessible to younger fans and other segments, sports marketing managers can nurture a new generation of loyal followers (Dees et al., 2022). Accessibility is critical in an era of intense competition for leisure time, and sports must continually innovate to remain relevant and appealing.

Media Coverage and Promotional Activities

Sports marketing heavily relies on media coverage and promotional activities. Traditional sports marketing focused on local teams, telecasting local teams' games on television and radio (Karg & Funk, 2020). More recent broadcasting focuses on balanced and equitable coverage of different sports teams and events, particularly regarding gender equity in sports coverage (Yingnan & Guoliang, 2023). Media outlets can help change perceptions and foster a more inclusive sports culture by providing equitable and diverse coverage (Antunovic & Bundon, 2022). Sports managers can increase awareness and popularity of sports franchises through traditional media channels.

Sports fans can view local, regional, national, and international sporting events irrespective of time zone with satellite and internet-based television. The advent of satellite and internet-based television revolutionized sports broadcasting (Nuriddinov, 2023), offering consumers accessibility to diverse international sporting events, including those not practiced in the United States. Satellite and internet-based technology allow sports enthusiasts to transcend geographical and temporal barriers and follow untraditional sports and their favorite teams and athletes anywhere in the world on demand (Wymer et al., 2021). Satellite television became popular in the 1980s, as was internet-based television.

In 2003, satellite and Internet-based television enhanced the fan experience by providing fans with personalized and interactive content. The increased availability of niche sports and lesser-known leagues further broadens the scope of sports viewership, democratizing access and fostering a more inclusive sports community. For instance, in

1999, approximately 84 million people watched the Super Bowl in the United States; in 2010 and 2023, the viewership was significantly higher, with approximately 100 million people viewing the game (The Big Lead, 2024). Sports advertising professionals argue that the advent of satellite-based television enhanced the viewership of significant events, such as the Super Bowl, allowing fans to connect to diverse teams (Ilan, 2021). Global viewership of the Super Bowl increased in 2024, with Mexico, Canada, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Australia contributing 24.1, 18.8, 3.8, 3.7, and 3 million viewers, respectively (NFL.com, 2024). One hundred and fifty million people similarly viewed the 2022 FIFA World Cup, including nearly six billion engagements on social media and 262 billion cumulative reach across all platforms (Inside FIFA, 2023). Social media increases the engagement of fans globally.

Expanding media coverage through streaming services significantly increases accessibility to sports content, catering to a diverse audience with varied preferences. Streaming services emerged as a pivotal platform in broadening the reach of sports media coverage (Ramon & Rojas-Torrijos, 2022). These services cater to the convenience and preferences of a global audience by offering on-demand access, breaking free from the constraints of traditional broadcasting schedules. The personalized nature of streaming services allows fans to curate their viewing experience, selecting from a wide range of sports content that spans local to international events (Connock, 2024). This shift enhances viewer engagement and opens up new avenues for fan interaction and community building, reinforcing the role of sports as a unifying cultural force.

In addition to media coverage, promotional activities build a deeper connection with fans. Promotional activities include community events, meet-and-greet sessions with athletes, and sports clinics (da Silva & Las Casas, 2020). Silva (2020) researched the effectiveness of football sponsorship on the dynamics of fan engagement. The study emphasized the role of fan identification in elevating the impact of sponsorships within football. Silva (2020) ascertained that strong identification with a team significantly influences the effectiveness of sponsorship strategies, leading to higher engagement and loyalty among fans. This correlation underscores the importance of targeted sponsorship activities in cultivating a dedicated fan base, which enhances the overall marketing success of the sport. Such promotional activities enhance the fan experience and bring sports closer to the community. Promotional activities give fans unique opportunities to interact with their favorite athletes and teams, creating memories and strengthening bonds (Gulay, 2023). Promotional activities are powerful tools for reinforcing brand loyalty and engaging fans more personally and meaningfully.

Marketing to Fluid Fans Through Social Media

In this section, I examine how sports marketing managers can target fluid fans through social media platforms. I discuss three main strategies: (a) leveraging social media influencers, (b) personalizing content marketing with an organic approach, and (c) leveraging emerging digital platforms. Sports marketing markets can use these strategies to market to fans with diverse allegiances to sports and teams.

Leveraging Social Media Influences

Sports marketing managers can engage with fluid fans through authentic influencer partnerships. The dynamic nature of fluid fans necessitates innovative marketing approaches (Dees et al., 2022). Leveraging social media influencers, who often share these fans' adaptability and digital savvy attributes, presents a strategic opportunity (Stoldt et al., 2020). Influencers can effectively bridge the gap between sports brands and fluid fans with their significant following and perceived authenticity (Hung, 2020). This approach aligns with the principles of identity theory, emphasizing the role of societal influences in shaping individual behaviors and interactions (Lee et al., 2020). Sports marketing managers can create resonant content that appeals to fluid fans' evolving identities and preferences by partnering with influencers whose values and interests align with a brand.

Collaborating with influencers extends beyond promotion into building communities around shared passions and interests. Influencers, by the nature of their brand, cultivate communities with whom they share genuine connections (Jacobson, 2020). Marketing professionals can harness connections with influencers to create a sense of belonging among fluid fans, who often seek connection in the digital realm (Duncan, 2020). Sports marketing managers facilitate a sense of belonging among fans by initiating campaigns where influencers engage fans in discussions, challenges, and immersive experiences related to the sport (McCarthy, 2023). This strategy fosters fan engagement and emphasizes the importance of building relationships through social media in the sports industry.

Sports marketing managers should focus on engagement metrics rather than just statistics regarding the number of fans reached to effectively leverage influencer partnerships. Engagement metrics, including likes, comments, shares, and the quality of interaction, indicate how well an influencer resonates with the target audience (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Tools like sentiment analysis and social listening can provide deeper insights into the effectiveness of these partnerships (Ballestar et al., 2020). Sports managers can gauge the influencer's impact on fluid fan engagement by analyzing engagement metrics (Naraine et al., 2022), aligning strategies more closely with fans' interests and preferences. Leveraging influence partnerships can enhance the overall effectiveness of the marketing campaign.

Personalized Content Marketing with an Organic Approach

Sports marketing managers can use organic marketing to connect with fluid fans. Organic marketing, which avoids paid promotions for natural engagement (Asante et al., 2022), is highly effective in resonating with fluid fans (Sports Innovation Lab, 2020). Organic marketing focuses on creating and sharing content that naturally attracts and retains a sports franchise's audience (Asante et al., 2022). Sports marketing managers can develop authentic, relatable, and compelling narratives to foster a deeper connection with fluid fans (Weber, 2019). This connection is crucial for the fluid fan demographic, which values authentic experiences and genuine interactions over forced advertising (Sports Innovation Lab, 2020). Organic content can range from behind-the-scenes footage and player stories (Zhang, 2022) to fan-generated content and interactive polls (Ennis & Ennis, 2020), each aiming to establish a more personal relationship with the audience.

Sports marketing connects with fluid fans through organic approaches to personalized marketing.

Social media allows marketing managers to gain large amounts of data regarding fan viewership. Sports marketing managers should employ data-driven strategies for personalization to enhance the effectiveness of organic content marketing (Kennedy et al., 2021). Managers can gain insights into the preferences and interests of fluid fans by analyzing social media metrics and fan behavior. Metric analysis allows for tailoring content to individual preferences, making each interaction more personalized and relevant (Haleem et al., 2022). For instance, if data shows a segment of fans favors a specific player or aspect of the game, marketing professionals can create content to cater to this interest. Metric analysis improves engagement rates and reinforces the fans' connection with the franchise, as they perceive the content as more relevant and tailored to their interests.

Effective organic content marketing is about disseminating information and storytelling that captivates and engages the audience. Sports franchises create emotional connections that transcend traditional marketing by telling compelling stories about the team's history, players, or fans (Harrison et al., 2021). This narrative approach can transform a casual viewer into a dedicated fan. Content that evokes emotions or shares common experiences can help maintain long-term engagement with fluid fans (Sports Innovation Lab, 2020). Integrating fans' stories or experiences into the franchise's narrative can further enhance this connection, as it reflects a genuine understanding and appreciation of the fan base.

Leveraging Emerging Digital Platforms

Embracing emerging digital platforms is crucial for sports marketing managers aiming to connect with fluid fans. Platforms such as eSports, virtual reality (VR), and augmented reality (AR) are redefining fan engagement (Sarkar & Ghosh, 2022). By integrating these technologies into their marketing strategies, sports brands can offer unique, immersive experiences that captivate tech-savvy fluid fans. For instance, VR provides fans with virtual front-row seats to games (Potwarka et al., 2022), while AR enhances the game-watching experience with interactive, real-time statistics and player information (Lin et al., 2022). Using VR and AR engages fans innovatively and positions the brand as a forward-thinking, tech-embracing entity, appealing to a demographic that values cutting-edge experiences.

Sports marketing managers can also target fluid fans through gamification. Gamification, incorporating game design elements in non-game contexts, is a powerful tool for engaging fluid fans on digital platforms (Jaskari & Syrjälä, 2024). By integrating gamification strategies, such as point scoring, leaderboards, and digital badges, sports marketing managers can transform passive content consumption into an interactive and engaging experience (Dreher & Ströbel, 2023). Gamification is particularly effective in capturing the attention of younger demographics accustomed to interactive digital experiences (Wut et al., 2021). Marketing professionals can employ gamification in various ways, from simple prediction games related to sports events to more complex fantasy sports leagues, each aiming to increase engagement and investment in the brand.

Microcontent and social media stories are effective tools for capturing the fleeting attention of fluid fans in the fast-paced digital landscape. Microcontent involves creating short, captivating content that fans can consume quickly and easily (Mohammadi et al., 2023). Platforms like Instagram Stories, Snapchat, and TikTok are ideal for microcontent, offering a way to engage fans with bite-sized, ephemeral stories that are both entertaining and informative (Shamayleh & Arsel, 2022). These platforms are also ideal for showcasing behind-the-scenes content, short interviews, and instant reactions to live events, providing a more personal and immediate connection with the audience (Baker & Baker, 2023). Sports franchises can keep fans consistently engaged and looking forward to the next piece of content by regularly updating these stories.

Transition

In Section 2, I critically analyzed the literature related to sports marketing to fluid fans. First, I described the study's conceptual framework, identity theory. Next, I discussed the evolution of sports marketing and the emergence of fluid fans. I then described how sports marketing managers can market to fluid fans through various methods, including social media. I highlighted the strengths of each type of marketing strategy.

In Section 3, I describe the methodology used in this study. I describe ethical considerations and the study's chosen research methodology and design. I discuss procedures for participant recruitment and selection, data collection, and data analysis. I also describe the procedures I used to promote the study's reliability and validity. Section 4 contains a presentation of the study's findings and a discussion of the study's

implications for practice and positive social change. The data obtained in the study led to data-driven recommendations for practice and future research.

Section 3: Research Project Methodology

The emergence of fluid fans changes how sports managers market professional sports franchises. Fluid fans are a new type of sports enthusiasts who are open to change, empowered to choose, and continuously evolving in their consumption of sports and related content (Sports Innovation Lab, 2020). The specific business problem is some U.S. professional sports marketing managers lack successful strategies to maximize the fluid fan base, to potentially gain revenue and remain competitive. This section includes a review of the project's ethical concerns, the nature of the project, and the study's population, sampling, and participants. I also discuss the data collection instruments, activities, interview questions, and data organization and analysis techniques. I conclude the section by discussing the measures I used to enhance the study's reliability and validity.

Project Ethics

Qualitative researchers have multifaceted roles. Qualitative researchers act as human instruments to collect, organize, and analyze data from human research participants (Khoa et al., 2023). During the study, I was an active participant in the role of the researcher. I chose a study methodology and research design, recruited participants, gathered qualitative data through semistructured interviews, and organized and analyzed the research data. Qualitative researchers must also adhere to the ethical standards of research (Wa-Mbaleka, 2019) and rigorous research standards that promote reliability and validity (Johnson et al., 2020). I performed each of these roles of a qualitative researcher.

Researchers should disclose their relationships to their chosen research topic to be transparent about potential biases. I have been involved with U.S. sports marketing since 2016 for a professional sports team. I have also conducted U.S. sports marketing research for the past seven years. To mitigate potential researcher bias, I engaged in researcher reflexivity by journaling in a research logbook.

I ensured that I followed all ethical standards of research. I maintained the well-being of the participants throughout the study by adhering to established ethical norms, as stated in *The Belmont Report* (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). I upheld the principles of *justice, beneficence, and respect for persons* throughout the study. The principle of justice promotes equitable representation in research by ensuring that participants are chosen fairly and equitably (Vetter et al., 2022). I showed respect for justice by ensuring that the participant selection criteria were fair and appropriate to address the research topic. The principle of beneficence involves protecting participants from harm (White, 2020). I upheld the principle of beneficence by ensuring that the benefits of the study outweighed the risks, treating the participants with dignity and respect, and ensuring that I protected the participants' confidentiality. Respect for persons involves respecting the autonomy of research participants (Vetter et al., 2022). I showed respect for persons by using an informed consent process to ensure the participants made informed decisions about voluntarily participating in the study.

Informed consent is a critical component of ethical research. Researchers should provide participants with informed consent forms that detail the study's purpose, the risks

and benefits of participating in the study, and the participants' rights (Xu et al., 2020). I used an informed consent form to ensure that each participant voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. After potential participants indicated their interest in the study, I emailed them an informed consent form (Appendix A). The informed consent form addressed the risks and benefits of participating in the study, each participant's right to withdraw for any reason, and the procedures I used to ensure the participants' confidentiality and privacy.

The informed consent form contains information regarding the participants' right to withdraw from the study at any time. Ethical guidelines indicate that researchers must allow participants to withdraw from a research study without fear of repercussion (Klykken, 2022). I ensured that the participants knew through the informed consent process that they could withdraw from the study without fear of repercussion. If a participant decided to withdraw from the study, I destroyed all data collected from the participant, including audio recordings, transcripts, and data analysis. I did not give any incentives to participants for their participation in the study. Some researchers ascertained that providing incentives to participants enhances the number of impostor participants who do not meet the study's inclusion criteria (Roehl & Harland, 2022). Therefore, I did not provide incentives for participating in the study.

I submitted the study for approval through Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure adequate ethical protection of participants. IRB approval is necessary to ensure that the methods used in research studies are sufficient to protect the participants (White, 2020). According to Xu et al. (2020), safeguarding participants'

confidentiality is paramount, which I can accomplish by communicating with them securely and not posting on public forums. Therefore, I spoke with participants through secure methods, such as encrypted email, to safeguard the participants' confidentiality and privacy. Secure communication and storing files on encrypted devices sufficiently protected the participants and their confidential information.

I maintained the participants' confidentiality throughout the study. Pseudonyms can protect participants' confidentiality in research studies (Lahman et al., 2023). I encoded all files related to participation in this study, including consent forms with pseudonyms for participants, such as DHP1, DHP2, and DHP3. If a participant mentioned information that could have reasonably identified them, such as their place of employment, I redacted it from their interview transcript to preserve their confidentiality.

I stored all research data for 5 years. Walden University's IRB mandates that researchers safely store all data for 5 years (Walden University, 2023). I safely archived the audio recordings, transcripts, and analytical data for 5 years. I also safely stored the informed consent forms for 5 years, as Walden University's IRB required. I stored all research-related materials and data in my home office on a password-protected, encrypted laptop and cloud drive. After 5 years, I destroyed the data using data destruction software. The IRB approval number was # 09-13-24-1084951.

Nature of the Project

I chose the qualitative method for this study. The qualitative approach is suitable for learning in-depth information about an established phenomenon (Khoa et al., 2023). Qualitative research simultaneously allows for a holistic and in-depth examination of a

phenomenon (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Qualitative research is commonly used by researchers seeking to understand social and business phenomena (Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2019). Researchers who employ qualitative methods rely on the participants' thoughts, feelings, and experiences to compile information and draw conclusions about a phenomenon under investigation (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Since the aim of the study was to understand participants' perceptions and experiences related to marketing to fluid fans, the qualitative method is appropriate and justified for this study.

I chose the pragmatic inquiry study research design for this qualitative study. Pragmatic inquiry studies involve strategically combining aspects of traditional qualitative research designs to suit the purpose of a study (Savin-Baden & Major, 2023). This study incorporated aspects of the qualitative descriptive (Doyle et al., 2020), case study (Yin, 2018), and qualitative document review (Morgan, 2022) methodologies, making the pragmatic inquiry appropriate for the study. The pragmatic inquiry research design allows for an in-depth exploration of a phenomenon using robust and strategically chosen methods (Savin-Baden & Major, 2023). For these reasons, I chose a pragmatic inquiry research design for my study.

Population, Sampling, and Participants

The target population includes sports franchise marketing managers. I collected data from six purposefully sampled supply chain managers in the Eastern United States. I selected participants based on predefined inclusion criteria. The participants were required to be: (a) located in the Eastern United States, (b) have at least 5 years of experience marketing to sports fans, and (c) have successfully designed marketing

strategies for maximizing a fluid fan base. Qualitative research assumes that the participants have in-depth knowledge of the phenomenon being researched (Chivanga & Monyai, 2021). Therefore, there is an alignment between the participants' characteristics and the study's central research question. The sports franchise marketing managers I interviewed were suitable for this research study because they had direct marketing knowledge to fluid fans. Thus, the participants' characteristics and expertise aligned with the overarching research question.

The choice of a sampling technique is critical for qualitative research. Purposeful sampling allows researchers to choose individuals who meet predefined inclusion criteria (Zickar & Keith, 2023). Snowball sampling relies on current participants recommending other individuals who may meet the study's inclusion criteria (Parker et al., 2019). In this study, I primarily used purposeful sampling to select participants. Purposeful sampling allows researchers to select information-rich cases with the appropriate knowledge to answer the study's research question (Stratton, 2021). I used snowball sampling as a secondary method if purposeful sampling did not yield the six participants necessary for the study.

I recruited participants through social media using the IRB-preapproved participant invitation (see Appendix B), which included the study's inclusion criteria, allowing participants to self-identify as qualified. Researchers should strive to build a positive rapport and working relationship with research participants (Roberts, 2020). I established a working relationship with participants by building a positive rapport. When

interacting with potential participants, I asked them screening questions to ensure they meet the study's inclusion criteria.

Qualitative researchers should strive to achieve data saturation, influencing the strength of the conclusions drawn from qualitative research. Data saturation is the data collection and analysis point where researchers do not gain additional information from interviewing additional participants (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Guest et al. (2020) found that in 92% of interview-based qualitative studies, researchers observed data saturation after interviewing six participants. Therefore, I chose a sample size of six participants, sufficient to reach data saturation.

Data Collection Activities

Researchers often use numerous data sources in qualitative studies to facilitate methodological triangulation. This procedure augments the credibility of the study's conclusions (Yin, 2018). Consequently, this pragmatic inquiry study involves using three data collection instruments. As specified in the researcher's role section, I served as the primary instrument. As the second data collection instrument, I analyzed publicly available company documents about marketing to fluid fans. Third, the participants completed semistructured interviews with open-ended questions. Using open-ended interview questions allows for systematically and methodically exploring participants' experiences and thoughts without imposing the researcher's personal biases (Ivey, 2023). The primary objective of the interviews was to explore the participants' viewpoints about the strategies they used to market to fluid fans successfully.

After participants reviewed the informed consent form and consented to participate in the research, I emailed them a link to an online scheduling application. This tool enabled participants to choose a suitable time and day to complete a semistructured interview. I conducted the interviews using the Zoom telecommunications program at the time and date selected by each participant. The Zoom platform offers a secure setting for individual interviews (Oliffe et al., 2021). This interview approach was appropriate for this research, as virtual interviews facilitated the active involvement of sports marketing managers in the Eastern United States who market to fluid fans successfully. I adhered to the interview protocol outlined in Appendix C. Using an interview protocol can help researchers mitigate researcher bias (Stahl & King, 2020). Interview protocols ensure that researchers ask all participants questions in the same order. Using an interview protocol can help researchers prevent potential personal bias from interfering with data collection (Roberts, 2020). Therefore, I used an interview protocol during the interview process. Each participant completed a single, 45-minute interview session. This time frame allowed each participant to elaborate on their perspectives.

After I conducted each interview, I transcribed the audio recording. Transcription accuracy in qualitative investigations is imperative, as data analysis relies on the transcriptions (Nascimento & Steinbruch, 2019). To transcribe the interviews, I used the Otter.ai transcription service. I compared the audio recordings to the transcriptions line-by-line to ensure transcription accuracy. I redacted all personally identifying information mentioned by the participants, including their names and places of work. After the interviews, I requested that the participants provide publicly available company

documents about marketing to fluid fans. I used these company documents to triangulate the interview findings.

Verifying participant interviews ensured that the data I collected was accurate. Candela (2019) explained that member checking can enhance the dependability and credibility of a qualitative research study. To conduct member checking, I sent a summary of my interpretation of each participant's responses to the interview questions for verification before I began analyzing the data. Member checking is a method that enables participants to provide feedback on a researcher's interpretation of their data (Candela, 2019). This process improves the dependability and trustworthiness of a study (Johnson et al., 2020). Using member checking augmented the trustworthiness of the study's findings.

Interview Questions

I designed the study's interview questions to align with the central research question, the study's conceptual framework, and the themes I identified in the literature review. I added additional questions to probe for new information not present in the literature. I added these questions so that the information gained from the study will increase knowledge about marketing to fluid fans. Table 1 shows the alignment of the interview questions with various components of the study.

Table 1
Interview Questions' Alignment to Proposal Components

No.	Question	Alignment
1	What strategies do you use to obtain fluid fans?	Central research question
2	What strategies do you use to retain fluid fans?	Central research question
3	How does maximizing fluid fan base influence your revenue and market competitiveness?	Gain new information
4	How do you identify and market to fluid fans based on their changing identities in sports fandom?	Identity theory: Identity salience
5	In your marketing strategies, how do you address the varying levels of commitment seen in fluid fans?	Identity theory: Commitment
6	What marketing strategies do you use to exploit social hierarchies among fluid fans?	Identity theory: Social hierarchy
7	What marketing strategies do you use to enhance fans' experiences?	Literature review theme
8	What ticketing strategies do you use to market to fluid fans?	Literature review theme
9	How do you incorporate media coverage and promotional activities into your marketing strategies for fluid fans?	Literature review theme
10	How do you leverage social networks and online communities in your marketing efforts to influence or reinforce sports fan identities among fluid fans?	Literature review theme
11	What strategies do you use to personal content marketing to fluid fans?	Literature review theme
12	What challenges have you faced adapting traditional marketing approaches to cater to fluid fans?	Gain new information
13	Based on your experience, what future trends do you anticipate in the behavior of fluid fans, and how are you preparing to respond to these trends?	Gain new information
14	What kind of data and analytics do you use to understand the shifting identities and commitments of fluid fans?	Gain new information
15	How do you gather feedback from fluid fans to inform your marketing strategies and campaign adjustments?	Gain new information
16	Are there any other marketing strategies you use to maximize a fluid fan base that we haven't discussed?	Gain new information

Data Organization and Analysis Techniques

I maintained a research log to denote the methodological details I used to conduct the study. During the study, I encoded each participant's interview transcripts and question responses using pseudonyms to ensure participant confidentiality and maintain the participants' privacy. I organized the semistructured data using NVivo Version 14, a qualitative data analysis software. Researchers frequently use NVivo to manage and store data from qualitative research studies (Alam, 2021). I also saved the company documents provided by the participants using the participants' pseudonyms. I redacted any sensitive or identifiable information from these documents. I also kept a reflexive journal, where I made notes regarding my perceptions of the participants' responses and behaviors. Reflective journaling is a crucial mechanism that researchers can utilize to acknowledge their reflexivity and mitigate researcher bias (McGrath, 2021). I stored all electronic data collected on a secure, password-protected, encrypted cloud drive. After 5 years, I shred any hard copies and used data destruction software to destroy all electronic data, as mandated by Walden University's IRB.

Data Analysis

Qualitative researchers conduct data analysis to present valid and reliable findings while enhancing the study's trustworthiness. According to Kiger and Varpio (2020), there are five main types of qualitative data analysis: (a) comparative analysis, (b) content analysis, (c) cross-case synthesis, (d) narrative synthesis, and (e) thematic analysis. I used Braun and Clarke's (2019) method for thematic analysis, sequentially transcribing, member checking, and coding each interview as I completed them. I used the NVivo

Version 14 software to organize transcripts and code data from semistructured interviews. I scrutinized company documents and compared the findings from the interview data. Member checking enables participants to verify a researcher's interpretations of their answers to interview questions, thereby enhancing the reliability and validity of the study's findings (Candela, 2019). Before I analyzed the data, I emailed participants my interpretations of each participant's answers to interview questions and asked them to verify the accuracy of my interpretations.

I analyzed the data collected from semistructured interviews through thematic analysis. Researchers use thematic analysis to analyze verbal data from qualitative studies (Lindgren et al., 2020). Data analysis involves organizing and dissecting the data to identify themes and patterns relevant to the research questions. I analyzed the interview transcripts using Braun and Clarke's (2019) method for thematic analysis, which involves six steps, as described below. Thematic analysis is a common approach to qualitative data analysis for data collected from semistructured interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Data analysis is a methodical and systematic process, allowing researchers to extract meaningful patterns from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Thematic analysis is a useful tool for researchers seeking to derive meaning from collected data.

I complete Phases 1 and 2 of Braun and Clarke's six-step method sequentially for each interview before moving to Phase 3, which is theme development. Phase 1 is familiarization with the data. In this phase, I transcribed the audio files from each interview into written transcripts. I read the transcript of each interview from start to finish to get an overall understanding of the data collected from individual interviews.

This phase often involves multiple readings of the interview transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2019). I then wrote my interpretation of the participant's answers to interview questions to conduct member checking. I conducted member checking for each interview immediately after I transcribed the audio file. Finally, I ensured that any personally identifiable information mentioned in the interview was redacted from the interview transcript.

Phase 2 is the coding phase. This phase involves categorizing the data into meaningful units, also known as coding (Saldaña, 2021). During the coding phase, I created a codebook that outlines the codes for categorizing the data, which is found in Appendix D. I made each code a descriptive phrase based on the participants' ideas and thoughts. I used NVivo Version 14 beginning in Phase 2. I completed Phases 1 and 2 for the first interview, then Phases 1 and 2 for the second interview, and so on, until I had exhausted all six interviews.

Phase 3 is the theme development phase. During this phase, I reviewed the coded data and extracted themes from the codes. Themes represent patterns and relationships between the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). To extract themes, I grouped similar codes together. In Phase 4, I will create a thematic map that details the connections between the codes and themes. The thematic map is a visual representation of the data that helps researchers organize their data logically (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This approach allowed me to identify similarities and differences between themes.

During Phase 5, I examined the thematic map and determined whether any new themes emerged. During this phase, researchers rename and redefine the codes and

themes when necessary (Braun & Clarke, 2019). I redefined and renamed similar themes into new, encompassing themes to remove redundant themes. In this phase, I addressed discrepant cases or participants who expressed different ideas from the others. I identified and documented discrepant cases so I could discuss them in the research findings.

According to Bingham and Witkowsky (2021), researchers should compare their study's findings with themes present in the academic literature using their conceptual framework as a theoretical lens. Therefore, during Phase 5, I correlated key themes from my findings with themes identified in the study's literature review. I also analyzed the findings using the theoretical lens of identity theory.

In Phase 6, I evaluated the data and data analysis holistically. This procedure is done to ensure that themes relate to the research topic. During this phase, I interpreted the data in the context of the study's conceptual framework. Finally, before analyzing the data, I summarized my interpretations of each participant's data and conducted member checking. Member checking enhances the credibility and validity of qualitative studies' findings (Candela, 2019). Methodological triangulation is the process of using more than one method to study a phenomenon (Farquhar et al., 2020). In Phase 6, I employed methodological triangulation to compare company documents with the findings from the semi-structured interviews to determine if data alignment occurred. The six-phased method for thematic analysis, document analysis, and member checking provided a robust analysis of the participants' data.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability

Reliability is an essential component of all research studies. In qualitative research, reliability pertains to the soundness of the research methodology, research design, sampling method, and data analysis (Vu, 2021). Researchers can improve the reliability or dependability of qualitative research through several strategies, including: (a) identifying researcher biases and reporting any preconceived assumptions or notions, (b) rigorously establishing the methods for participant recruitment and data collection and analysis, and (d) accurately report the information provided by the participants (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Following these guidelines, I used various methods, including extensive researcher reflexivity protocols, to enhance the reliability and dependability of the study.

Dependability

Promoting dependability is an essential component of a study's reliability. Dependability is a method researchers use to establish rigor and trustworthiness in qualitative studies that rely on the use of rigorous protocols for data collection and analysis (Rose & Johnson, 2020). In this study, I promoted the dependability of my findings in three ways. First, I documented my research protocols in my research log to establish the participants and research methods rigorously. Using a research log enhances methodological rigor by allowing researchers to thoroughly document their methodological choices (Johnson et al., 2020). Second, I kept a reflexivity journal within my research log to note my preconceived notions and thoughts at each stage. McGrath (2021) indicated that using a reflexive journal makes researchers aware of potential bias.

Third, I used member checking to allow the participants to confirm my interpretation of their data. Member checking is an essential mechanism that qualitative researchers use to enhance the trustworthiness of their studies' findings (Candela, 2019). These methodological choices helped improve the dependability of the study's findings.

Validity

Validity is another crucial aspect of research studies. Rose and Johnson (2020) noted that qualitative researchers can improve the validity of their findings through data triangulation and data saturation. According to Halkias et al. (2022), qualitative researchers achieve external validity, or transferability, in qualitative studies by evaluating multiple cases, using triangulation, and comparing their findings to those in the academic literature. In my research, I enhanced validity by creating a respectful interview atmosphere and encouraging participants to be open and honest in their responses. Using an interview protocol with open-ended questions helped me gather detailed answers and include honest opinions, perspectives, and examples. The validity of a qualitative study is assessed through credibility, transferability, and confirmability.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the believability of a research study. According to Wood et al. (2020), credibility involves readers' confidence regarding the study's conclusions. I enhanced the credibility of the study's findings in multiple ways. First, I used data from participants from numerous supply chain management companies. Using various sources enables researchers to provide a rich, detailed description of the data, thereby promoting data saturation (Rose & Johnson, 2020). I also kept a reflexive journal within my research

log throughout the research process. Using a reflexive journal allows researchers to document their perceptions of the research process (McGrath, 2021). I also used member checking to ensure the accuracy of the information presented in the research findings. Member checking is how researchers confirm their interpretations of the study's findings with research participants (Candela, 2019). These mechanisms enhanced the credibility of the study's findings.

Transferability

Transferability is like the concept of generalizability in quantitative studies. Specifically, transferability refers to the ability to apply the research findings to other cases with similar individuals (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Johnson et al. (2020) indicated that thoroughly documenting methodological choices can promote the transferability of a study's findings. To address transferability, I rigorously documented my data collection and analysis methods and described the interview protocol, case study, participants, and research findings. According to S. Campbell et al. (2020), the purposeful sampling technique can also enhance the transferability of a study's conclusions by selecting participants who are diverse. I attempted to select participants from different regions in the Eastern United States so that local community culture would not influence the study's findings. I addressed transferability by ensuring that the selected participants interviewed were diverse and representative of the study's general population.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the extent to which other researchers can replicate the research findings. Researchers can enhance the confirmability of a study by rigorously

documenting the study's anticipated and actual methodology (Halkias et al., 2022). Using an interview protocol can enhance confirmability by ensuring that researchers ask all participants the same questions in the same order (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). To achieve confirmability in my study, I used an interview protocol for the semistructured interviews. Ensuring the accuracy of interview transcripts is another mechanism for promoting confirmability (Prosek & Gibson, 2021). Therefore, I accurately documented the interview transcripts and compared them line-by-line with the interview audio recordings. Researchers can also promote confirmability through researcher reflexivity (McGrath, 2021). To minimize researcher bias, I used reflexivity protocols, including journaling, to document my perceptions as a researcher.

Data saturation is essential for confirmability. Data saturation is when researchers do not gain new information by interviewing more participants (R. Campbell et al., 2020). Once researchers reach saturation, data collection is complete (R. Campbell et al., 2020). To achieve data saturation, I conducted interviews with as many manufacturing supply chain managers as necessary until no new data or insights emerged.

Transition and Summary

In Section 3, I discussed product ethics and the nature of the study. I identified the population, sample, and sampling technique. I described procedures for participation, data collection, and data analysis. I also discussed the methods I used to ensure the reliability and validity of the study. In Section 4, I present the research findings, discuss applications for professional practice, outline implications for social change, offer

recommendations for action, and propose future research directions. I also discuss my reflections on the research process and provide conclusions.

Section 4: Findings and Conclusions

Presentation of the Findings

The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry research project was to identify and explore the successful strategies that some U.S. sports marketing managers use to engage and retain fluid fans. I addressed one overarching research question in the study: What strategies do U.S. sports marketing managers use to maximize the fluid fan base to potentially gain revenue and remain competitive? I conducted semistructured interviews with six sports marketing managers representing major professional teams across the United States. I analyzed the data using Braun and Clarke's (2019) thematic analysis method and identified three themes. The first theme was that managers build fluid fan engagement by grounding content in regional identity. The second theme was that managers elevate player-driven storytelling to foster fan loyalty. The third theme was that managers use platform-specific strategies to expand reach and tailor content.

Section 4 presents an interpretation of the findings from participant interviews. I provide an in-depth analysis of each theme and subtheme, highlighting the specific challenges managers face in engaging fluid fans and the strategies they employ to address those challenges. The analysis includes a comparison to existing literature and application of Stryker's (1980) identity theory as the study's conceptual framework. To ensure analytical depth and theoretical alignment, I explain how each finding relates to core tenets of identity theory, including role salience, social structure, and identity-based behavior. This integrated approach ensures that the study's findings are both theoretically

grounded and practically relevant, offering insights that can inform marketing strategies and deepen scholarly understanding of fan identity in contemporary sports culture.

Theme 1: Grounding Fluid Fandom in Regional Identity

To address the business problem of how U.S. professional sports marketing managers develop successful strategies to maximize fluid fan bases, participants described how they build lasting loyalty through locally rooted initiatives. The strategies they shared reflected a recognition that regional identity and emotional connection often serve as anchors for fluid fans, who otherwise move quickly between teams and athletes. This theme has three subthemes. In the first subtheme, the managers addressed regional loyalty and legacy support, capturing how teams preserve fan identity through deep cultural connections, historic branding, and regional pricing strategies. In the second subtheme, they described community integration and cultural identity, highlighting how organizations use grassroots programming, player engagement, and local partnerships to build relational loyalty with neighborhoods and civic institutions. In the third subtheme, the participants explained how they executed next-generation regional strategies, emphasizing future-facing tactics such as youth programming, influencer outreach, and geographically targeted ticketing campaigns. These efforts illustrate how sports marketers use place-based engagement to generate durable attachment within a fluid fan landscape.

Subtheme 1.1: Strengthening Loyalty Through Regional and Legacy Roots

This section focuses on how sports marketing managers deepen fan engagement by anchoring it in regional loyalty and legacy support. As fluid fandom continues to challenge traditional team allegiances, several participants described strategies that

emphasize local pride, historical continuity, and cultural connection. These approaches aim to transform casual or player-focused interest into long-term commitment by highlighting what makes the team's home city and legacy unique. Managers reinforced the idea that strong regional identity offers a foundation for fan loyalty that can weather performance fluctuations or external competition. By cultivating a sense of place and history, they create emotional stakes that bind fans to the organization.

Professional sports marketing managers emphasized that regional loyalty remains a powerful anchor for sustaining fan engagement in an era increasingly shaped by fluid fandom. Despite evolving audience behaviors, many marketing leaders continue to view place-based affiliation as a cornerstone of enduring fan relationships. DHP2 highlighted that many long-term fans maintain strong team affiliations based on local or regional identity, describing this demographic as reliable and deeply rooted: "We have a lot of fans who will probably always be fans of the [Great Lakes Thunder]. Those predominantly reside in [redacted state] or are from the area so that we can count on those core fans." This notion of place-based consistency, fans who maintain allegiance due to geographic or cultural identification, illustrates the continued relevance of territorial attachment, even amid national and global reach.

Grounded fan engagement strategies frequently began with understanding the natural geographic and cultural boundaries that shaped team identity. DHP6 reinforced the value of geographic proximity in sustaining loyal fan bases. The importance of regional concentration was noted as a strategic advantage, particularly in building a stable supporter base that remains invested through the team's highs and lows. DHP6 explained,

“I think our specific demographic is pretty local. I think there aren't a lot of people outside of [redacted state] who are huge [redacted teams] fans.” This concentrated regionalism, according to DHP6, yields a fan culture more likely to engage with the team as a holistic entity, rather than through attachment to individual players. The participant further explained,

So it's not necessarily as much like you were talking about, sort of like the you're a fan of a specific player versus the full team, like most of our fans are pretty bought in on the team, or they're not bought in at all.

This insight highlights the contrast between stable, geography-driven fandom and the more transient, individual-driven allegiances associated with fluid fans. As other participants explained, reinforcing this regional identity required intentional strategies that reflected the cultural pride and distinctiveness of the local community.

Other managers discussed the power of regional pride and cultural distinctiveness in reinforcing emotional connection. DHP1 described several strategies used to deepen this bond with local communities, including halftime performances by local artists and videos celebrating Boston's unique cultural personality. Their description of the season's campaign strategy reveals how storytelling grounded in place can deepen emotional resonance:

We are working on making sure that we build this bond with the people locally, whether that's bringing in local artists for halftime performances. Many of our marketing videos were about this aspect of difference here, which focuses on Boston and what makes our city different, interesting, and passionate in this

championship city. And really, you could feel that cry throughout the entire season, which led to our championship.

This approach positioned regional identity not only as a background for the team's branding but as a central feature of fan loyalty cultivation. Marketing managers cultivated affective ties that extended beyond the scoreboard by connecting sports performance to civic identity and local pride,

Honoring legacy support was also a central tactic for reinforcing regional loyalty. DHP4 emphasized the importance of aligning marketing messages with the organization's historical milestones, ensuring that long-time fans felt represented in the team's evolving narrative. They explained: "Our content team is under communications versus marketing, so we work very closely with the marketing team to identify what we're trying to accomplish. The last couple of years with our centennial celebration have been very focused on that." Commemorating team heritage helped maintain relevance for multigenerational fan bases and built continuity between past, present, and future identities.

Beyond symbolic gestures, several managers focused on economic strategies to retain local and legacy supporters. DHP5 highlighted the role of pricing as a tool to protect access and signal loyalty to existing fans, saying:

Some of the strategies we were just talking about in a meeting today is with really kind of going into, like, our ticket sales strategy, making sure that we're pricing it correctly, so that we're not one bleeding out like the fans that love and want to see Big City Dragons.

By managing ticket affordability, teams could demonstrate commitment to their long-standing base while ensuring financial inclusion in a market where elite pricing structures often alienate traditional supporters.

Expanding place-based loyalty was another theme, especially in geographically adjacent areas. DHP5 described an intentional push to broaden market reach across New England, noting the importance of in-person game experiences and symbolic regional inclusion:

We are expanding our region to the entire New England area. Doing that with the Boston game has proven that point. We can appeal to Rhode Island, we can appeal to Maine, we can appeal to, you know, Boston, Massachusetts, and we can also appeal to some of the border areas between Connecticut and New York.

DHP5's suggests that regional loyalty can be both cultivated and expanded with the right strategic intent. Teams can proactively seed new loyalty across compatible regional cultures rather than relying solely on inherited fan bases. At the same time, DHP5 acknowledged the need to balance core loyalty with new, often player-driven engagement from distant fans:

We know that we have to appeal to a New York fan base. We have to appeal to an [redacted region] fan base. So that we don't, like I said, price people out, but then we also are taking advantage of the fans that are coming in from different areas.

In addition to programming and pricing, branding served as a symbolic vehicle for anchoring the team in regional consciousness. DHP6 described efforts to ensure that fans associated the team with their geographic identity rather than with generic or

national narratives: “The forefront for us is brand awareness. When you hear Big City Dragons, you don't think of [city], you don't think of a newspaper, you think of, you know, the basketball team, like [redacted region's] team.” This intentional link between team and place was designed to build a cohesive, place-rooted identity that could withstand shifting allegiances in the broader fan market.

Together, these insights suggest that while fluid fandom presents new opportunities, regional identity remains a powerful foundation for engagement. Managers used cultural storytelling, community-specific pricing, heritage campaigns, regional expansion, and localized branding to reinforce loyalty among place-based fans. These strategies reflect an understanding that meaningful fan relationships are often shaped as much by place and identity as by wins and statistics. For sports organizations navigating an increasingly competitive and dynamic marketplace, grounding their brand in regional loyalty offers both emotional resonance and long-term strategic stability.

Subtheme 1.2: Deepening Fandom Using Community Cultural Connection

Sports marketing managers described how community-based strategies and cultural integration sustained regional identity and reinforced fan relationships. These initiatives extended team visibility beyond the game by embedding the organization into daily civic and cultural life. Managers detailed how partnerships with small businesses, youth organizations, and schools helped teams become recognizable fixtures in their communities. Local events, grassroots outreach, and culturally resonant branding allowed fans to develop emotional ties rooted in familiarity and shared values. Participants

viewed these strategies as necessary for maintaining long-term engagement in markets where fan attention shifts quickly and regional loyalty cannot be assumed.

Sports marketing professionals emphasized that community integration strategies were central to fostering emotional bonds between teams and local populations. These efforts anchored fan identity in shared cultural values and regional traditions. DHP1 explained how their organization strengthened city-based loyalty by incorporating local culture into events and media content. They featured local artists in halftime shows and framed marketing campaigns around the city's uniqueness. They explained,

We are working on making sure that we build this bond with the people locally, whether that's bringing in local artists for halftime performances. Many of our marketing videos were about this aspect of difference here, which focuses on Boston and what makes our city different, interesting, and passionate in this championship city. And really, you could feel that cry throughout the entire season, which led to our championship.

This approach reinforced a collective sense of identity among fans, aligning civic pride with team success. DHP1 reiterated that the marketing team emphasized the city's distinctiveness: "Many of our marketing videos were about this aspect of difference here, which focuses on Boston and what makes our city different, interesting, and passionate in this championship city." These localized branding efforts grounded fandom in place-based meaning, which added emotional resonance to the fan experience.

Other participants described how teams leveraged players' community involvement to humanize the brand and strengthen relational ties. DHP2 described a

charitable event where a player gave gifts to underserved youth and the team amplified the gesture through their channels:

Last year, for example, [Zephyr] had an event where he was at a local Kohl's retailer, and he was giving out gifts to, I think, underprivileged kids. And so we definitely cover that. We support [Zephyr] in that we amplify that on our channels. And so that's just one example of a bunch of things that we do in the community with players specifically, not only to show the good that the player is doing, but also that ties into a sponsor and just kind of highlights the good in the community.

DHP2's approach shows how marketing teams translated isolated goodwill moments into broader engagement strategies. The events became symbolic of the team's social role, building trust and credibility among fans.

Grassroots programming played a similar role in cultivating long-term emotional investment. DHP4 shared the importance of local youth outreach as a strategy to develop early loyalty. They explained,

Growing at a grassroots and hockey level is a big thing for us. Like we have a very strong Youth Hockey development program that goes into the communities and starts things up, like I said, at the grassroots level, to make sure that kids in Boston from any background or any demographic are fans and hockey fans, and trying to start it there, so that they develop a lifelong, you know, fans and bond with the team and the organization.

Teams helped young fans form long-lasting emotional connections by embedding the brand into early sports experiences. These programs established the organization as a lasting presence in the lives of local families.

DHP5 provided multiple examples of how their team wove community partnerships into ticketing and fan experience initiatives. These partnerships created feedback loops that helped the team improve future events. DHP5 described one such effort, saying:

Also going into, like the community aspect of our ticketing, so reaching out to community partners, reaching out to small businesses, and getting them involved with the experience and the process as well, so that way we can provide them a great experience, but then also get the feedback for how we can do things better the next time.

Another strategy involved giving tickets to community groups to increase visibility and fill the arena. As DHP5 explained, “We also reach out to some of our community partners and offer them tickets to bring their community groups and youth groups to games, in an effort to fill the arena and spread brand awareness through ticket sales.” These approaches expanded access while signaling that the team valued inclusion and participation. The relationships built through this outreach enhanced fan goodwill and diversified the team’s local supporter base.

Additional outreach included connecting with colleges to build engagement with younger adults. DHP5 asked, “Another group that comes to mind is college groups. How can we do maybe a tabling at some of these events and get our sales team out there and

get them to be ticket holders?” By targeting students, the team invested in the next generation of fans with potential for long-term loyalty. DHP6 further emphasized community integration through affinity programs and local partnerships. Their team established clubs for children and even pets as a way to sustain emotional links with fans who had moved away:

We have, like, a fan club for dogs. We have a kids club, and a lot of that is like, yes, it's locally focused, but like, anybody can join the fan club for dogs. So like, if you lived in [redacted city] previously and have moved away, but like, you want to still have that connection, that's a big thing that has become pretty huge over the last couple of years.

The use of creative programming fostered fan nostalgia and retained emotional connections beyond geography. DHP6 also described outreach to small businesses and schools, explaining:

We do a lot of stuff with like [redacted region] small businesses and like local schools and things like that, to try to get people to be excited about things we're doing, even outside of football, and draw more people in that way.

Community partnerships rooted the team in the local economy and strengthened their identity as a community asset.

DHP6 pointed to physical gathering spaces like team-sponsored patios as part of their strategy, saying:

We should involve some of our partners and sponsors in that experience and ensure that we are just delivering on some of the aspects that make Big City

Dragons unique. So delivering on, like we have a Dragon's patio, so having pre-game or post-game events on the patio during the summer is something we can take advantage of.

This comment reflects a deliberate effort to cultivate spatial rituals that anchor fandom in physical settings. Hosting events on the Dragon's patio created a sense of place and routine that encouraged repeat attendance and emotional attachment. Tangible, shared experiences added depth to the brand narrative by linking team affiliation with lived moments, strengthening the perception of the organization as a central node in the city's cultural and social landscape. Such site-specific engagement also allowed sponsors and partners to participate visibly, amplifying commercial relationships while reinforcing the team's local roots.

Together, the participants' accounts reflect a coordinated, multidimensional strategy to build cultural resonance through community connection. Marketing managers leveraged local partnerships, youth development initiatives, social causes, and cultural branding to strengthen their presence and establish trust among regional audiences. Community-rooted approaches supported the broader business objective of cultivating a loyal fan base in an environment shaped by increasingly transient allegiances. Such grounded, physical experiences laid the foundation for expanding fan relationships into future-facing strategies that reach younger audiences and new regional markets.

Theme 1.3: Building Future Loyalty Through Youth and Regional Growth

The participants recognized that long-term competitiveness required strategic planning that looked beyond immediate engagement to cultivate future fans. This section

highlights how managers intentionally invested in youth programming, influencer outreach, and regional expansion to ensure brand relevance across generations.

Participants described initiatives that introduced children and young adults to the team through camps, clinics, and social media partnerships. These efforts did not operate as passive awareness campaigns. Instead, they acted as structured pathways that guided younger and peripheral audiences toward more meaningful and sustained fandom.

Alongside youth efforts, managers implemented expansion strategies designed to grow the brand's footprint beyond traditional geographic boundaries. Together, these approaches reveal how sports marketing managers strategically positioned their organizations to adapt fluid fandom into durable, future-oriented loyalty.

Professional sports marketing managers emphasized long-term fan development by targeting youth segments through structured programs. DHP1 described their in-house "Junior [Team name]" initiative as a strategic point of first contact. This program included leagues, camps, and clinics to ensure that early exposure translated into long-term attachment. He explained,

We also have our Junior [Team name], which is our programming, that is a great touchpoint for us... our Junior [Team name] is our—it's kind of like our junior NBA, but that's all in-house run. So we have leagues, camps, clinics... we're trying to start by building that younger fan base and having that connection to the team that may be their first touch point.

This approach reflects a developmental strategy that embeds the team into childhood experiences to convert early exposure into durable loyalty. This approach reflects a

developmental strategy that embeds the team into childhood experiences to convert early exposure into durable loyalty. Teams created a pathway where fandom became habitual and emotionally reinforced from an early age by anchoring brand familiarity in structured, positive activities like camps and clinics. Such initiatives established rituals of participation and made team identity part of a young fan's personal story, which deepened emotional investment and increased the likelihood of lifelong affiliation.

Complementing this programming, DHP2 described how targeted influencer collaborations helped shape youth interest, particularly for fans motivated by lifestyle and identity markers. They noted,

We work with some influencers, both large and small, to try to appeal to some of our fans with other outside interests, whether that's working with like a local Milwaukee influencer that may have a large TikTok following, who could appeal to some of our younger fans and kind of what they can get out of a game day and enjoy the experience if maybe they care a little bit less about basketball, but more about like status and just showing that you're at a game.

This comment demonstrated that youth engagement strategies required cultural fluency. The team recognized that younger fans often relate to sports as an extension of social identity. Organizations extended their relevance beyond the game itself and connected with values like visibility, belonging, and style by aligning the brand with youth-facing influencers. Collaborations with influencers positioned the team within the everyday media ecosystems of young people, helping to normalize team affiliation as part of their broader cultural expression.

This approach reflects a developmental strategy that embeds the team into childhood experiences to convert early exposure into durable loyalty. Creating this fan connection through structured youth programs laid the groundwork for lifelong affiliation. Complementing this programming, DHP2 described how targeted influencer collaborations helped shape youth interest, particularly for fans motivated by lifestyle and identity markers. He noted:

We work with some influencers, both large and small, to try to appeal to some of our fans with other outside interests who could appeal to some of our younger fans and kind of what they can get out of a game day and enjoy the experience if maybe they care a little bit less about basketball, but more about like status and just showing that you're at a game.

The team acknowledged that younger fans often consume sports differently, focusing on aesthetic experience, digital presence, and social credibility. These strategies adjusted the fan pipeline by speaking directly to the motivations of Generation Z and younger millennials.

DHP4 reframed this generational shift as a long-term directive to future-proof the organization. Reflecting on the team's centennial celebration, he described how the organization balanced legacy branding with a forward-looking mandate. "Coming out of this Centennial, the directive is we're moving into a new century of [redacted team]'s hockey... how do we create that next era into a new century again?" This comment framed generational expansion not as a reactive tactic but as a structural reorientation of team identity. For DHP4, generational reach was not limited to a specific age bracket but

conceptualized as a cultural horizon: “That's the directive of growing the game and the Grizzlies. I think it's an overarching directive to take the Grizzlies into the next century with new fans and a new generation.” He later reinforced this focus by identifying youth as a key target: “That includes, obviously, a younger demographic and kids, and bringing them into the Grizzlies world.” These reflections illustrate how leadership viewed younger fans as essential to organizational continuity.

Strategic outreach was also rooted in data-driven expansion initiatives designed to push the brand past its traditional geographic limits. DHP5 described how their team used ticket sales analytics as a foundation for a broader engagement strategy. “We are just trying to take advantage of our ticket sales strategy and letting the analytics around that branch out into our other departments and strategies with content, partnerships, community relations, etc.” The sales pipeline became a central lever for cross-department coordination, informing decisions in content creation, marketing, and community activation. DHP5 elaborated on how marquee events outside their core market reshaped geographic strategy: “The Boston game that we had last season, and we're going to have another one in 2025... It's getting us out of this, like, small market mindset into, okay, we can appeal [more widely].” These out-of-region events served dual purposes: growing new audiences while also testing the broader brand’s viability.

The relationship between strategy and optics was further emphasized by DHP6, who described how visual experiences helped shift regional perceptions and energize dispersed fan pockets. He explained:

We provided towels. We knew we were playing Indiana in the first round, so we wanted to make it look like there were no [redacted state] fans in the building. We wanted to create the illusion of a sea of orange. So, we provided orange rally towels on all the chairs to give that game-day experience and give them something to use to cheer, while also considering how it looks optically.

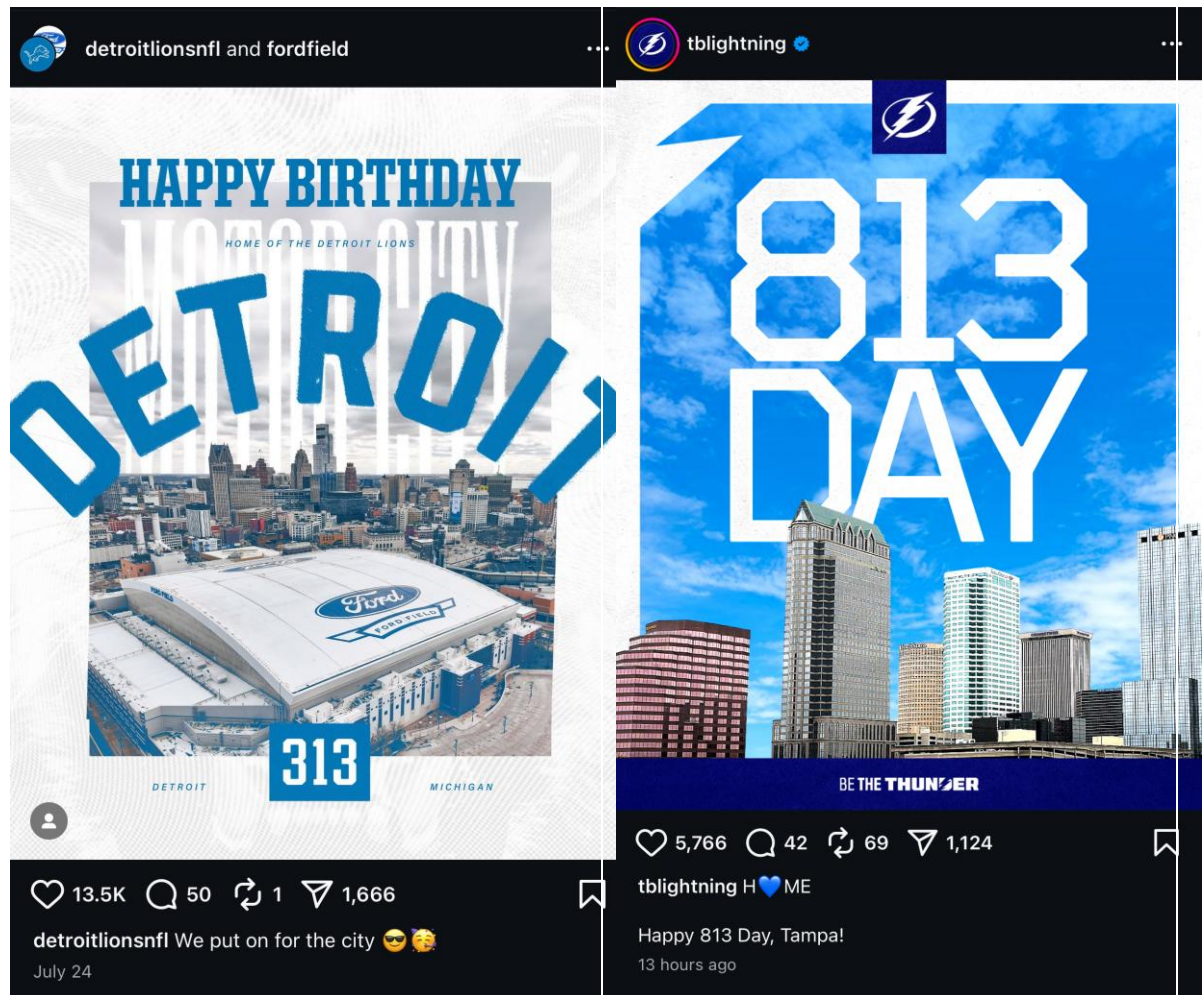
This tactic demonstrated how visual branding could amplify a sense of regional solidarity, even in mixed or out-of-market settings. Physical symbols like towels and color schemes were used to construct atmosphere, align fan behaviors, and project regional dominance on digital platforms. These aesthetic strategies extended the fan experience from physical to virtual, offering continuity across diverse engagement settings.

Evidence from Organizational Documents

Organizational documents derived from social media pages of professional teams across sports affirm teams' emphasis on identifying with and leveraging the culture of the local community. A noteworthy aspect of this discussion is that the documents presented in Figure 1 are not derived from the participants' sports teams but rather are representative of the larger trends highlighted by the participants. Consequently, the professional sports teams shown in Figure 1 are not documents provided by the participants.

Figure 1

Evidence from Social Media for Community Culture



Sports teams increasingly market to fluid fans by leveraging community culture, as seen in Figure 1. The Detroit Lions' Instagram post connects with local pride by highlighting "313," Detroit's area code, alongside imagery of Ford Field and the city skyline. This approach fosters a sense of belonging by tying the team's identity to the broader cultural fabric of the city, rather than just the sport itself. Similarly, the Tampa Bay Lightning's "813 Day" post links the team to Tampa's community celebration by featuring the

skyline and local area code, making the team part of a shared cultural moment. These examples demonstrate how teams create emotional connections by embedding themselves in local traditions and identity markers. By emphasizing cultural relevance, teams position themselves not only as athletic organizations but also as stewards of community pride, appealing to fluid fans who value cultural engagement as much as sports performance.

The use of local symbols in Figure 1 also reflects how teams strategically tap into the emotional identities of fluid fans who may not be lifelong supporters but still feel cultural pride. By centering campaigns on area codes and civic celebrations, teams lower the barrier of entry for casual or new fans who may identify more with the city than the team itself. This approach reframes fandom as a form of cultural participation rather than a purely athletic commitment. For fluid fans, this provides a reason to engage with the team as part of their city identity, even if their sport-specific loyalty shifts. Ultimately, these practices reinforce the team's role as a cultural institution, ensuring relevance across diverse and transient fan segments.

Comparison of Theme 1 to the Academic Literature

The findings from Theme 1 confirm that place-based loyalty remains a foundational element in sports marketing, even amid the rise of fluid fandom. The participants repeatedly described how regional attachment, cultural identity, and legacy support anchor fan loyalty, reinforcing claims by Coombs (2021) and Varmus et al. (2021) that traditional sports marketing emphasized emotional ties rooted in geography. These results align with the historical emphasis on localized branding and culturally

resonant messaging in sports advertising strategies (Abeza et al., 2020). The managers described loyalty that persisted across seasons and performance cycles when grounded in place, suggesting that territorial identity still functions as a buffer against the volatility of fluid fandom. Moreover, the participants used regional pride and local storytelling to deepen emotional stakes and reinforce a sense of belonging. These strategies reflect a continuation of traditional sports marketing principles even as digital expansion reshapes fan behavior.

Fluid fans are often described as lacking strong ties to regional identity. This perspective is supported in the literature, which positions fluid fans as largely untethered from geography (Huettermann & Kunkel, 2022; Sports Innovation Lab, 2020). However, the findings from this study challenge that view by demonstrating that regional identity can still function as a compelling force. The participants described how cultural symbolism, legacy events, and local economic partnerships helped preserve a strong sense of regional identity that appealed to both long-term and younger fans alike. DHP1's emphasis on integrating Boston's cultural distinctiveness into halftime shows and campaign storytelling reinforces Ramon and Rojas-Torrijos's (2022) assertion that digital tools enhance content delivery. However, the finding contrasts with claims that place no longer matters. Instead, this study found that regional loyalty remains powerful when translated through modern media and symbolic rituals. The sports marketing managers did not abandon geographic ties; they repackaged them in visually compelling, digitally amplified formats. This approach illustrates how legacy loyalty adapts to digital environments rather than being displaced by them.

The findings further extend literature on fluid fandom by illustrating how regional loyalty is actively cultivated rather than passively inherited. While earlier studies suggested that fluid fans are disengaged from community-rooted affiliations (Peng, 2022), the participants in this study discussed how outreach initiatives, symbolic branding, and pricing strategies contribute to the development of regional identity over time. DHP5's description of expanding outreach to Rhode Island, Maine, and other New England regions demonstrates an intentional strategy of place-based fan acquisition. This proactive regional cultivation contrasts with the notion that regional loyalty is an outdated or static model, instead demonstrating how it can evolve in tandem with broader marketing objectives. Sports organizations are utilizing both physical proximity and cultural relevance to establish enduring regional connections that appeal to a diverse fan base. These results suggest that regional loyalty is no longer assumed but rather created through structured engagement and market-specific tactics.

Fluid fans are often portrayed as primarily player-driven and noncommittal. This depiction appears in the literature, which emphasizes their tendency to shift allegiances based on personal interest rather than team loyalty (Sports Innovation Lab, 2020). However, this study found that legacy-focused campaigns still resonate with large fan segments. The participants described heritage branding and commemorative events as effective tools for strengthening emotional connection among multigenerational audiences. DHP4's comments on the centennial celebration revealed that long-standing traditions and historical milestones remained powerful touchpoints in cultivating fan loyalty. This finding confirms Hudders et al.'s (2021) broader argument that emotional

resonance and narrative depth enhance fan engagement, but it does so through a traditional rather than influencer-based lens. These results suggest that heritage content functions as an anchoring force amid fluctuating loyalties, particularly when paired with personalized digital delivery. Regional and historical storytelling remains a relevant tactic for fan retention even within dynamic consumption models.

The findings also align with existing research on accessibility and pricing as mechanisms for fostering inclusion and sustaining local loyalty. Participants described pricing strategies designed to retain long-term fans in the face of rising demand and premium seating models. DHP5 emphasized that pricing must account for both legacy fans and newer, transient audiences, aligning with Baker's (2022) assertion that dynamic pricing can help retain cost-sensitive consumers. This finding supports prior work by Ennis and Ennis (2020), who advocated for pricing models that accommodate uncommitted or price-conscious fans. In this context, ticketing becomes a loyalty tool that signals appreciation for long-time supporters. The dual focus on expansion and accessibility shows that regional loyalty is preserved through both emotional connection and economic inclusion. These insights confirm the literature's emphasis on experience-based marketing while demonstrating how pricing contributes to identity preservation.

In terms of regional branding, participants discussed deliberate efforts to associate team identity with geographic symbols, confirming that brand localization remains central to modern sports marketing. DHP6's remark that "when you hear Big City Dragons, you don't think of [city], you think of the basketball team" highlights a symbolic inversion where the team becomes synonymous with the place. This confirms

the findings of Kennedy et al. (2022), which suggest that effective branding integrates team and community identity into a unified narrative construct. Unlike global branding strategies that emphasize portability, localized branding seeks permanence and emotional resonance with specific communities. These results extend prior literature by showing how teams actively engineer regional meaning to embed themselves in the cultural consciousness of their fan base. Regional branding thus functions as both a marketing strategy and a form of symbolic territorial occupation.

The study's findings reveal a layered view of fandom that confirms the enduring value of traditional marketing strategies while extending them through modern applications. The study affirms the role of geographic identity and heritage branding but also expands the conversation by showing how regional loyalty is constructed in deliberate, market-driven ways. In doing so, it challenges the binary framing of traditional versus fluid fans by illustrating how elements of both models coexist within contemporary sports marketing practice. While digital technologies have diversified fan pathways, place-based strategies remain vital in anchoring fan identity across market segments. Sports marketing managers are not choosing between tradition and innovation. They are blending these constructs to meet the demands of a fragmented yet emotionally driven fan base. These findings suggest that regional identity continues to offer strategic stability in a volatile fan economy.

Interpretation of Theme 1 using the Conceptual Framework

The findings from Theme 1 align with the first tenet of identity theory, which asserts that individuals develop identities based on their social roles (Stryker, 1980). This

study revealed that many fluid fans still adopt the role of a “regional supporter” when provided with narrative or communal reinforcements such as legacy campaigns or place-based rituals. Despite the literature’s emphasis on the flexibility of fluid fans (Sports Innovation Lab, 2020), this identity role remained meaningful, especially when tied to family traditions or civic pride. Social media played a significant role in this process by providing fans with channels to explore and express their regional affiliation, allowing fans to form identities that integrate digital and geographic belonging (Toffoletti et al., 2021). The ability of fans to develop regional loyalty within a fragmented media environment confirms Redhead and Power’s (2022) assertion that relational and societal inputs shape identity hierarchies, and that sports fandom can still be rooted in place even when mediated through digital spaces. These findings suggest that legacy-rooted fan identities persist even within the broader context of fluid fandom.

The second tenet of identity theory posits that societal roles dictate behavioral expectations (Stryker, 1980), and this was reflected in participants’ descriptions of how teams promote specific fan behaviors through regional branding strategies. Teams created legacy-oriented events, nostalgia campaigns, and throwback merchandise to guide fan participation and encourage identity enactment. These symbolic cues not only instructed fans on how to behave but reinforced the idea of regional fandom as a socially sanctioned role with clear expectations. Gross and Vostroknutov (2022) emphasized that societal norms act as informal rules that guide behavior. In this context, fans conformed to the behavioral expectations embedded in regional campaigns, such as attending city pride nights or promoting heritage content on social media. The emphasis on scripting behavior

through legacy and geographic symbolism demonstrates how sports organizations can reinforce fan roles that are consistent with social norms and historical continuity, aligning with Horne and Mollborn's (2020) view that normative pressures shape how individuals perform their social roles. The persistence of these expectations affirms that traditional forms of fandom still structure how teams build emotional connections with their audiences.

Identity salience, the third tenet of identity theory, refers to the likelihood that a given identity will be enacted in a specific context (Stryker & Serpe, 1982). This study revealed that while fans often prioritize player-based or entertainment-oriented identities, regional loyalty can become salient in emotionally resonant or high-stakes situations. For example, participants observed that during playoffs, rivalry games, or community crises, fans who otherwise follow individual athletes shifted toward enacting regional fan identities. Thoits (2020) explained that situational triggers and emotional commitments play a vital role in determining identity salience, and this was confirmed by the ways marketing teams used community storytelling and legacy events to increase fans' emotional investment. The study also affirms Charness and Chen's (2020) finding that reinforcement and value alignment elevate identity salience, as fans' loyalty to regional identity increased when it intersected with personal meaning, cultural pride, or shared history. These findings suggest that identity salience is dynamic and can be influenced by marketing interventions that enhance the emotional significance of regional affiliation.

The fourth tenet of identity theory highlights the role of social structures in shaping identity formation and enactment (Stryker, 1980). This study's participants

described how regional fandom was embedded in institutions such as local schools, family traditions, religious groups, and civic organizations. These structures act as conduits through which fan identity is introduced and cultivated. Scott and Cnaan (2020) emphasized the role of institutions in reinforcing identity roles by transmitting social values and expectations, and the findings here align with that claim. Teams that partnered with schools, youth leagues, or city-wide campaigns successfully rooted fandom in structural identity formation. Gong (2022) also argued that social structures, including digital communities, actively inform how individuals negotiate their roles in fluid cultural environments. This study supports that assertion by showing how regional identity, though mediated through social media, still relies on structural supports to gain legitimacy. Sports organizations helped fans translate abstract loyalty into concrete expressions of identity that are both culturally meaningful and personally resonant by aligning marketing strategies with broader social institutions.

Theme 2: Player-Centric Content Strategy for a Fluid Fan Base

To address the business problem of how U.S. professional sports marketing managers develop successful strategies to maximize fluid fan bases, participants emphasized a shift toward player-centered engagement. The participating marketing managers consistently described how fans, particularly younger audiences, form attachments around individual athletes rather than teams, requiring new tactics that foreground personality, lifestyle, and player mobility. This theme has three subthemes. In the first subtheme, participants described how they leveraged player-driven loyalty to draw in fluid fans whose commitment often followed athletes across teams. In the second

subtheme, they explored how high-profile acquisitions created new fan pipelines and expanded visibility, while also presenting conversion challenges. In the third subtheme, participants shared how they amplified off-court interests and personal narratives to enhance player relatability and deepen brand engagement. Together, these subthemes illustrate how sports marketers adapt to shifting audience behaviors by using player-focused storytelling and event design to attract and retain younger, more fluid fan bases.

Subtheme 2.1: Building Loyalty Around Player Identity

The sports marketing managers described how fan loyalty is increasingly shaped by individual players rather than team affiliation, prompting a strategic shift toward personality-driven content. Younger audiences often prioritize players' personal stories, values, and style over long-term allegiance to a single franchise. DHP1 identified social media as a critical vehicle for this shift, explaining, "We know that fans do not necessarily always subscribe to a team. Still, we must tap into social media as the younger fan base comes in." For managers, platforms like Instagram and TikTok are tools for promotion, while also serving as storytelling environments where player charisma can foster parasocial bonds. DHP1 reinforced this idea by stating, "We see that that fluid fan is a lot of times somebody who may be interested in a player," highlighting how fans often arrive through personality before performance. The marketing challenge, then, is to transform this initial curiosity into sustained brand engagement by spotlighting off-court dimensions of player identity.

The transition from player fandom to team loyalty was recognized as a slow and uncertain process requiring deliberate narrative scaffolding. The participants

acknowledged that most fluid fans enter through individual appeal and may or may not transfer that interest to the broader organization. DHP2 captured this dynamic clearly, stating, “Hopefully it can, over time, move people who are fans, maybe a particular player on the team, to the team as a whole.” However, they also admitted that this conversion is rare when fans lack regional or familial connections to the franchise. DHP2 explained that for many fans, “as that player moves from team to team, so does your fandom,” underscoring how team attachment becomes secondary to personal loyalty. This pattern has compelled teams to develop retention strategies that strike a balance between spotlighting individual players and showcasing the team’s broader culture and local identity.

The participants also emphasized that fluid fandom is not a theoretical idea but rather a lived experience that requires cultural fluency to manage effectively. DHP3 offered a personal reflection that illustrated this trend, noting, “I’m a Mavs fan being back home, so I know exactly what you’re talking about with that,” linking their own fan behavior to the fluid, player-driven loyalty they now market to others. DHP3’s comment highlights how marketers themselves have experienced the evolution of fandom and must now respond to it in their campaigns. This recognition of audience fluidity led managers to rethink what it means to be a loyal fan, replacing historical attachment with aesthetic, cultural, or interpersonal relevance. Rather than attempting to resist this shift, teams sought to meet it head-on through more flexible engagement pipelines. This generational insight grounded marketing teams’ willingness to build loyalty not from geography or history, but from relevance and resonance.

In response to this shifting terrain, several managers described expanding their outreach beyond conventional sports demographics to attract fans whose entry points into fandom are cultural rather than regional. DHP4 described this broadened targeting strategy: “We need to appeal to non-traditional [redacted player] fans or people who aren't even [redacted team] fans or hockey fans,” reflecting a pivot toward inclusivity and lifestyle branding. DHP4’s perspective emphasized how traditional team boundaries no longer define the reach of sports brands. DHP6 offered a vivid example of how the organization adjusted its messaging around a charismatic player, stating:

When we have a personality on the team, like we had [redacted player] this last season, that's a national appeal, or like, really focusing in on that, so hammering home the things that can broaden us out a little bit, I think, is definitely something that we've done a good job of doing since I've been there, of trying to broaden things out.

DHP6’s reflection confirmed that internal marketing culture had already embraced player-driven national expansion as a deliberate strategy. In these approaches, players became more than team representatives. They served as cultural access points that allowed sports organizations to transcend regional limits and meet fans where their interests naturally formed.

Subtheme 2.2: Leveraging Star Power to Attract and Monetize Fluid Fans

The marketing managers described how high-profile player acquisitions serve as strategic catalysts for attracting new fans, particularly those whose loyalties follow individuals rather than organizations. These star signings, often involving players with

national or international appeal, provided a gateway into new markets but required complementary efforts to deepen engagement beyond surface-level interest. DHP2 illustrated how two recent signings helped broaden the fan base, explaining:

We have a lot of international fans, too, who are basketball fans. Still, maybe specifically [redacted player], and he's been a significant part of this organization since the arrival of [different redacted player]. Then obviously, with [redacted player]'s arrival last year, we got a lot of people who were fans of him, who became fans of the [redacted team] now because they're fans of [redacted player].

These comments reflect a pattern in which player-based loyalty leads fan migration, prompting organizations to adjust branding and outreach accordingly. While these fans may initially engage because of a specific athlete, teams should still invest in strategies that invite emotional and financial commitment to the broader franchise.

The participants acknowledged that drawing in player-loyal fans involves showcasing who the players are off the court. This humanizing approach was seen as essential for connecting with a younger audience shaped by fluid fandom and social media influence. DHP2 emphasized the need for expanded storytelling, saying:

Because we see that that fluid fan is a lot of times somebody who may be interested in a player, and kind of bringing in that fan base in that way, like focusing on the players and what their interests are. So a big part of that is figuring out how we can maximize, like, focus on our players and bring in personality pieces, or focus on not only our players on the court but also their off-the-court interests.

Managers saw the push for expanded storytelling as an opportunity to frame players as multi-dimensional figures whose values and lifestyles align with those of emerging fans. These off-court narratives provided an alternative pathway to loyalty for fans who may not solely engage with wins and losses. As teams worked to amplify players' personal brands, they simultaneously reinforced the team's relevance as a platform for identity, access, and cultural participation.

The participants also admitted that player acquisitions do not always lead to immediate or full brand conversion. While star signings often generate attention, fandom remains highly individualized and difficult to monetize without additional strategy.

DHP3 provided an example of this challenge, explaining:

We signed our quarterback last offseason. I have a couple of friends who grew up watching him on his old team. They're like, Oh, I'm happy for the guy. I'll keep an eye out. But they're not necessarily switching their fandom to that team as much as they'll still like the guy.

DHP3's quote revealed the limited effect of player movement on fan loyalty when the emotional connection remains rooted in the athlete rather than the franchise. Teams should therefore design layered conversion strategies that move fans from casual admiration to meaningful engagement through targeted experiences, relevant content, and effective incentives.

The participants consistently voiced concerns about the economic implications of fluid fandom, particularly when attention fails to translate into financial support. Capturing fans who admire star players requires converting visibility into action, yet this

remains a persistent gap in the marketing pipeline. DHP3 raised this issue directly, stating, “I think the fluid fans are good. How do we convert them to people that want to spend money is something that we don’t necessarily do a lot of with our position.” This reflection highlights a critical business challenge: while social engagement may increase with new player arrivals, revenue may lag unless teams intentionally guide fans toward transactional opportunities. The participants suggested that a more robust integration of commerce into fan experience design was necessary to close this gap. The need to build systems that facilitate fluid attention in financial investment has emerged as a common strategic concern.

To address these challenges, some teams refined their regional pricing strategies to capture player-focused fans from outside their traditional markets. DHP5 described this effort, saying,

So, we have to appeal to a [redacted city] fan base. We have to appeal to a [redacted state] fan base. We're really trying to ensure that our strategy, with ticket sales, is priced right for fans who may just be coming here for [redacted player].

This pricing flexibility reflected an awareness that fans may only attend once or follow a player temporarily, and teams must remove barriers to that entry. Teams aimed to turn rare engagement into physical attendance by adapting ticket models to star-based interest. This targeted strategy enabled organizations to welcome new fans without requiring them to fully commit to the franchise. Teams positioned these visitors as short-term participants with potential for deeper affiliation over time.

The marketing managers also emphasized that creating memorable, player-centered experiences can extend fans' emotional connection to the team. These experiences often extended beyond game attendance, focusing on access and personalization. DHP5 explained:

They're coming here for the things that we can offer, whether it be the players that are on our team, what we can offer them, as far as just different incentives, like pre-game stuff, post-game stuff, meet and greets, different things like that. These offerings encouraged fans to transition from spectators to participants, utilizing personal interaction as a means of fostering loyalty. By creating curated experiences around players, teams offered unique value that social media alone could not replicate. This experiential marketing approach helped bridge the gap between admiration and attachment, translating star appeal into a more lasting connection with the team culture and identity as a whole.

Subtheme 2.3: Humanizing the Brand Using Off-Court Engagement

The marketing managers emphasized that building emotional resonance with fluid fans required showcasing athletes as relatable individuals with distinct personalities and off-court commitments. This approach allowed organizations to foster fan loyalty based on values, identity, and storytelling rather than purely athletic success. DHP1 described the centrality of personality-driven branding, stating, "A big part of that is figuring out how we can maximize, like, focus on our players and bring it in like personality pieces, or focus on not only our players on the court but also their off-the-court interests." This framing reflects a strategy that merges content creation with lifestyle marketing to appeal

to younger, identity-driven audiences. Fans are increasingly drawn to players whose interests align with their own, including fashion, social causes, or entertainment. Teams responded to this shift by developing media narratives and engagement opportunities that celebrated personal authenticity.

The participants also described how community involvement initiatives allowed teams to highlight players' character and social presence in ways that built trust and goodwill among fans. These events were strategically promoted through official media channels to extend their impact and reinforce organizational values. DHP2 provided an illustrative example:

Last year, for example, [Zephyr] had an event where he was at a local Kohl's retailer, and he was giving out gifts to, I think, underprivileged kids. And so we definitely cover that. We support [Zephyr] in that we amplify that on our channels. And so that's just one example of a bunch of things that we do in the community with players specifically, not only to show the good that the player is doing, but also that ties into a sponsor and just highlights the good in the community.

DHP2's account shows that these off-court events allowed the team to serve the community, highlight corporate partners, and build compelling media narratives that extended the players' and team's brand. Managers recognized that spotlighting social engagement elevated the player's reputation while extending the team's cultural relevance beyond athletics.

Fan behavior further validated the appeal of player-centered engagement strategies, especially when audiences made attendance decisions based on individual athlete appearances. Participants noted that even committed ticket holders often prioritized games based on which star players would be present. DHP5 captured this emerging pattern, stating, “Even fans that just like our season ticket members that just want to see certain games and certain players or our teams, and then they want to resell like the Indiana tickets because of the pricing and the value.” This fan behavior revealed a transactional layer to fandom that centered around marquee matchups and recognizable personalities rather than season-long allegiance. For marketers, this insight reinforced the need to treat individual athletes as rotating points of connection for specific fan segments. Teams responded by adjusting communications and ticketing strategies to reflect demand patterns tied to player visibility. These responses enabled organizations to meet fans where their interests were most concentrated, using player presence as both a magnet and a message.

Evidence of Theme 2 from Organizational Documents

Player-centric content has emerged as a dominant strategy in sports marketing because it speaks directly to the expectations of fluid fans, who are less committed to teams and more drawn to personalities, authenticity, and cultural narratives. Unlike traditional fans who often prioritize team loyalty, fluid fans navigate across leagues and sports in search of meaningful connections. Highlighting athletes’ individuality and humanity allows teams to maintain relevance by extending the fan experience beyond the boundaries of competition. This approach also creates an accessible entry point for casual

or new fans who may not have a deep-rooted allegiance but are attracted to lifestyle or cultural elements. Figure 2 demonstrates how teams strategically present players as more than athletes, positioning them as relatable figures and community representatives.

Figure 2

Marketing to Fluid Fans by Humanizing Players



The examples in Figure 2 reveal how sports organizations humanize players to build multidimensional connections with fluid fans. The Washington D.C. Valkyries' post featuring a player's arrival outfit does more than highlight fashion; it positions the athlete as a cultural influencer, appealing to fans who value lifestyle branding and

personal expression. In contrast, the Pittsburgh Steelers showcase players with children at training camp, reinforcing themes of family, accessibility, and community service, which align with fans' desire for socially meaningful engagement. These strategies underscore a critical shift in sports marketing: the performance of players is no longer the sole product. Instead, players' identities, values, and cultural resonance have become equally important assets. Teams cultivate emotional investment that strengthens loyalty even in an era where fan allegiance is increasingly fluid and transactional by blending personal branding with community presence.

The strategy in Figure 2 also acknowledges the increasing importance of athletes as individual brands in the sports marketplace. Fans who may not follow a specific team are drawn to personalities, styles, and off-field identities, making human-centered content essential for maintaining relevance. Highlighting athletes' fashion, humor, or community interactions creates additional entry points for fan engagement beyond game-day performance. This player-focused marketing ensures that even when fluid fans change allegiances or follow multiple sports, their interest in specific players keeps them connected to the team's brand. In this way, sports organizations leverage individual star power to secure sustained engagement from audiences who consume sports through personality-driven narratives.

Comparison of Theme 2 to the Academic Literature

The findings from Theme 2 confirm that fluid fans are increasingly drawn to individual athletes rather than sports organizations, which validates prior scholarship that identifies fluid fans as empowered consumers who navigate sports experiences based on

personal interests. The participants emphasized the marketing value of player visibility, personality, and off-court presence as levers for capturing audience attention, especially among younger demographics. This emphasis aligns with the Sports Innovation Lab's (2020) definition of fluid fans as those who are open to change and driven by evolving preferences. Several participants explained that athletes serve as entry points into fandom, particularly through platforms such as TikTok and YouTube, where fans follow players for their cultural influence more than their in-game performance. Huettermann and Kunkel (2022) noted that fluid fans often support athletes over teams. The findings of this study confirm that teams have adapted by developing promotional strategies centered on player charisma and media fluency. These findings reinforce that player-driven fandom is a structural reality that shapes sports marketing decisions at both strategic and tactical levels.

In contrast to earlier marketing models that prioritized team loyalty and geographic identity, the participants described a shift toward player-centric branding that seeks to mirror consumer culture and lifestyle trends. Participants highlighted strategies such as Q&A content, fashion-focused videos, and off-court storytelling as effective tactics for sustaining attention and engagement, particularly on fast-paced digital platforms. These methods align with findings presented by Wymer et al. (2021), who found that personalized social media experiences enhance fan engagement by offering more tailored and emotionally resonant content. However, the findings also extend current literature by showing that sports marketers now treat players as multi-dimensional media products whose influence crosses traditional genre and platform boundaries.

Where previous research has primarily framed influencers as external content creators (Hudders et al., 2021), this study's findings demonstrate that athletes themselves function as embedded influencers within their team's strategy. Marketing teams build campaigns around players' personal brands to attract culturally aware and socially active audiences who may not otherwise identify with a particular team.

The findings also challenge the assumption that team-based loyalty is obsolete for fluid fans, revealing instead that players can serve as transitional figures guiding fans toward broader organizational affiliation. The participants described how athlete appeal often initiates fan interest, but that strategic storytelling and experience design can gradually convert that attention into team-oriented loyalty. DHP2's remarks on fandom following the arrival of a specific player illustrated a progression from player-based entry to partial franchise identification. This transitional view complicates the binary perspective often presented in the literature, contrasting traditional and fluid fans (see Brooks, 2023). Rather than operating as separate segments, fluid fans often move along a continuum of interest, in which player admiration evolves into deeper engagement with the team. This finding challenges Pradhan et al.'s (2019) implication that fluid fans are entirely incompatible with legacy-based loyalty systems, instead suggesting that fluidity and commitment can coexist under the right narrative and experiential conditions. This observed shift reframes fluid fans as participants in a loyalty spectrum rather than as outliers, opening new opportunities for sports marketers to build long-term engagement through player-driven storytelling.

The findings extend the literature by illustrating how sports organizations strategically engineer conversion pathways that begin with personal fandom and culminate in economic engagement. The participants described how fans initially attracted by a player often attend games, interact with content, and participate in merchandise experiences built around that athlete. The literature acknowledges the economic potential of fluid fans (Mamo et al., 2022), but this study adds clarity on the operational mechanisms that transform attention into revenue. Pre-game and post-game experiences, meet-and-greet events, and personality-driven merchandise were all cited as strategies to influence fans' purchasing behavior. These findings confirm that sports marketing teams are now adopting a lifestyle-commerce framework, in which the athlete serves as both content and conduit. This approach aligns with Lee's (2021) argument that marketing effectiveness increases when athlete endorsements are grounded in authenticity and cultural relevance. Together, these findings suggest that player-centric strategies grounded in personal authenticity offer a sustainable pathway for cultivating deeper loyalty among fluid fans

Scholars often emphasize the challenges of monetizing fluid fandom due to its volatility and fragmented loyalties. This concern appears in the literature, which highlights how fan unpredictability undermines traditional revenue strategies (Karg & Funk, 2020). However, the findings in this study show that fans' connection to players creates new forms of brand stickiness that marketers can activate. The participants noted that although fluid fans may initially follow athletes across teams, emotional bonds often deepen through personalized digital interactions and localized fan experiences. This

insight adds nuance to the fluid fan model, showing that fandom is not purely transactional but can shift into relational engagement when supported by consistent storytelling and platform-specific content. The participants' perspectives extend the findings provided by Yun et al. (2020), who described fluid fans as seeking personalization, by illustrating how player narratives offer a stable emotional core within a flexible loyalty framework. In this sense, fluid fandom does not break from tradition; instead, fluid fandom is an evolution of tradition, enabled by digital ecosystems and person-centered branding. These findings position player-focused strategies as an adaptive response to the demands of a rapidly changing fan environment.

The findings from Theme 2 confirm much of the existing literature on personalization, digital media strategy, and the rise of player-centric engagement while offering new insights into how fandom conversion unfolds over time. The emphasis on athlete personality, lifestyle content, and interactive fan experiences reflects an ongoing shift toward human-centered marketing in the sports industry. Rather than resisting fluidity, sports organizations are now structuring their entire engagement model around it, using players as dynamic entry points into broader fan ecosystems. This marketing approach acknowledges fans' emotional and cultural investments while guiding them toward more stable and transactional forms of loyalty. Such strategies also reframe players as assets within the game, as well as vehicles for narrative, connection, and commerce across platforms. The study's findings suggest that future sports marketing models will need to sustain agility in content design while deepening their commitment to personalization through player-focused storytelling.

Interpretation of Theme 2 using the Conceptual Framework

Fluid fans increasingly shape their sports identities around athletes, rather than franchises. This dynamic reflects the first tenet of identity theory, which proposes that individuals form identities based on their societal roles (Stryker, 1980). Participants in this study described how fans, particularly younger demographics, develop sports identities through engagement with athletes' personal brands, including fashion, values, and lifestyle content. Social platforms facilitate this process by enabling fans to integrate their roles as consumers, followers, and participants into personalized digital routines (Levental et al., 2023; Toffoletti et al., 2021). As a result, athletes function as identity anchors, helping fans situate themselves within the sports ecosystem. The growing prominence of player-based fandom illustrates how societal roles shape fan behavior and affiliation.

Fans' expectations for how athletes should behave publicly are informed by the second tenet of identity theory, which states that social roles come with behavioral norms. Participants emphasized that fans expect athletes to be authentic, socially engaged, and accessible through digital content—norms that directly shape how marketing teams position players (Abele et al., 2021; Chun & Sagas, 2022). Players who participate in charity events or express personal interests off the court reinforce the fan's perception of credibility and relatability. These actions reflect culturally shaped expectations tied to the social role of the “modern athlete,” which includes visibility,

virtue signaling, and responsiveness. Sports marketers recognize that meeting these expectations is essential to maintaining emotional resonance with fluid fans. Player behavior and marketing narratives are increasingly governed by role-based expectations embedded in fan culture.

Identity salience also explains why fans prioritize athletes over franchises across platforms. This third tenet of identity theory refers to the likelihood that a particular identity becomes dominant in a given context, shaped by commitment, feedback, and personal values (Stryker & Serpe, 1982; Thoits, 2020). Participants described how fans selectively amplify their identity as supporters of specific athletes by sharing player content, wearing player merchandise, or engaging in discussions centered on individual personalities rather than teams. Because many of these fans see athlete affiliation as more congruent with their own values or social circles, that identity becomes more salient in their online and offline interactions (Fenton et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2022). The flexible loyalty structure of fluid fandom reflects shifts in salience, where the player-centric identity often takes precedence over regional or team-based ties. Athlete allegiance often dominates as the most activated identity in social fan spaces.

Social structures inform how fans perform and sustain these player-focused identities. The fourth tenet of identity theory highlights that institutions like media, peer networks, and social norms critically shape identity development (Anglin et al., 2022; Stryker, 1980). In the current sports media environment, players are framed as both athletes and influencers, with platform algorithms and branding strategies reinforcing this dual role. Participants noted that fan expectations are largely formed through curated

digital interactions, influencer marketing trends, and community engagement models embedded in social media (Cereda, 2023; Watkins, 2018). These institutional forces normalize the idea that fandom should be personality-driven, adaptive, and digitally mediated. Sports organizations and digital ecosystems together cultivate the structures that guide fans' identification with players over time.

Theme 3: Strategic Use of Social Media and Global Expansion

To address the business problem of how U.S. professional sports marketing managers develop successful strategies to maximize fluid fan bases, participants emphasized the role of digital media platforms and global engagement in reaching fragmented audiences. Marketing managers described how platform-specific strategies allowed teams to tailor content for different demographics, particularly younger fans who prefer nontraditional sports engagement. Social media emerged as a primary tool for communicating brand identity, testing new storytelling formats, and bypassing geographic limitations. Participants also described how teams used behind-the-scenes content, culturally relevant trends, and international outreach programs to attract fans who might otherwise remain disconnected from local game-day experiences. As traditional fan behaviors became less predictable, marketing leaders adopted flexible content and localization strategies to expand their reach while retaining authenticity. This theme encompasses four subthemes that examine how teams utilized social media platforms to target segmented audiences, created differentiated content to foster emotional affinity, developed international campaigns to cultivate global loyalty, and employed adaptive messaging strategies based on sentiment and engagement data.

Theme 3.1: Platform-Specific Audience Targeting

The participating marketing managers described how platform-specific strategies allowed them to reach segmented audiences with tailored content, particularly as younger fans gravitated toward emerging digital platforms. Rather than broadcasting identical content across all channels, teams employed distinct messaging approaches tailored to TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, and other social media platforms to align with audience expectations and behaviors. DHP1 emphasized the importance of focusing on younger viewers through platform selection, stating, “That can be done by using several different social media platforms, particularly by trying to grow interest in TikTok with that younger fan base.” The managers recognized that TikTok’s format and culture favored casual, trend-based content that resonated with Generation Z, while older fans responded to different kinds of interaction. DHP3 clarified the demographic split across platforms: “Our younger audience will be on TikTok, and our older audience will be on Facebook. So, we don’t necessarily like to change our message, but we might like to tailor it more toward a specific audience on either side.” These distinctions informed a dual-layered strategy that preserved brand consistency while optimizing delivery for varied consumption habits.

The participants highlighted TikTok and YouTube as key tools for expanding beyond their core followers and attracting new, nontraditional fans. These platforms were used to reinforce loyalty among existing supporters and introduce the team to people who may have no prior sports engagement or regional affiliation. DHP3 explained this approach, noting, “Even YouTube has been our big focus over the last couple of years.

Those are areas in TikTok in particular where, you know, you're probably reaching people that aren't [redacted team] on X and Facebook and Instagram." For teams rooted in legacy branding, these platforms offered a creative space for reinvention and experimentation. DHP3 continued, "Our strategy is to go outside of the boundaries of what we usually do as an original 16 with 100 years of history and do a lot of stuff that isn't hockey-focused. It's more trend-based; it's more pop culture." The managers utilized this flexibility to appeal to fans interested in entertainment, lifestyle, or identity-based media, rather than focusing on game scores or player statistics.

The participants described how content on newer platforms was designed with a sense of spontaneity and cultural immediacy that differed from legacy channels. TikTok, in particular, was seen as a space for experimentation with interactive formats and humorous or viral content. DHP4 confirmed this shift in emphasis, saying, "That's been a big part of our strategy over the last few years when we discuss delving into TikTok. And you know, even YouTube has been our big focus over the last couple of years." The strategy reflected an understanding that attention is fragmented, and fans are more likely to encounter team content through their algorithm-driven media habits than through formal sports broadcasts. The managers sought to normalize casual exposure and create space for deeper engagement by positioning the team within the entertainment ecosystems that fans already frequent. These approaches also provided a testing ground for content that could later be scaled to other platforms depending on performance and fan reach.

The managers also discussed how platform strategy intersected with content philosophy, particularly in relation to originality and exclusivity. Participants described the need to offer something distinct that fans could not find on ESPN, Bleacher Report, or other national outlets. DHP2 offered an example of this principle. They said:

When it comes to posting content, you know, we really try to post things that resonate with the fans and showcase things that they can't get from anywhere else... what can we show that makes fans want to follow our account precisely? And maybe that's, you know, the highlight from our videographer who's on the court. It's a different look than they'll get from the broadcast.

This exclusive camera angle strategy helped distinguish the team's digital presence and offered fans a unique value proposition. It emphasized intimacy over scale, providing a sense of access that large media outlets could not replicate. Teams shifted their approach from generalized highlights to customized experiences that aligned with the logic of each platform by creating content that felt more personal and tailored.

The participants connected content trends on TikTok with player visibility, emphasizing how fan interest often centered on individual personalities rather than organizational identity. The platform's emphasis on short-form, personality-driven content encouraged teams to showcase the human side of players through Q&As, reactions, and lighthearted features. DHP6 illustrated this tactic by saying:

We definitely have tried to hone in on those trending whatever, TikTok, Q-and-A stuff, or when we have a personality on the team, like we had [redacted player] this last season. That's a national appeal, or like, really focusing on that.

The platform thus served as a stage where players became the focal point of cultural and social relevance. Teams used this format to break down barriers between the athlete and the audience, portraying players as approachable, expressive, and relatable. In doing so, the marketing managers capitalized on the intimacy and immediacy of digital fandom to strengthen emotional connection with younger viewers.

DHP6 further reinforced the reach-building function of TikTok as a growth tool supported by strategic hiring and trend analysis. The managers recognized that simply being present on a platform was not sufficient; it required fluency in meme culture, timing of humor, and reactive engagement. DHP6 explained, “I think recently our as we’ve grown our social team and gotten more on some trends and stuff like, via TikTok, we’re trying to reach a larger audience.” Growing the team’s digital staff was seen as essential to maintaining cultural relevance and pushing out timely, high-engagement content. The participants suggested that trend fluency was a competitive advantage that separated static, traditional messaging from the dynamic, ever-evolving expectations of younger fans. This organizational investment reflected a strategic commitment to digital literacy as a pillar of long-term fan acquisition and retention.

Subtheme 3.2: Content Differentiation and Behind-the-Scenes Value

The marketing managers emphasized that effective digital strategies required exclusive, emotionally resonant content that differentiated team channels from broader sports media. Rather than replicating highlight reels available through national brands, teams sought to offer unique access and behind-the-scenes perspectives that would foster deeper fan loyalty. P2 explained this principle clearly: “Maybe that’s the highlight from

our videographer who's on the court. It's a different look than they'll get from the broadcast. Teams positioned themselves as insiders capable of offering experiences mainstream outlets could not replicate by producing content that felt embedded and personal. This strategy emphasized intimacy and proximity, appealing to fans who sought authenticity and emotional connection rather than generic game footage. Teams used these visual narratives to invite fans into spaces usually reserved for players, staff, or in-arena spectators to promote inclusion.

The participants viewed exclusivity and uniqueness as central to building fan affinity in the digital age, particularly in competitive media environments. Teams designed their social accounts to provide special value through access, tone, or framing unavailable elsewhere. DHP2 described the team's goal in doing so: "By creating an account that gives reasons for people to follow and provides access that other teams or brands can't get, we're hoping we can strengthen that fan affinity." The implication was that content is no longer just informative or entertaining to fans. Instead, content must establish emotional ownership and relational credibility. Exclusive angles and formats encouraged fans to see the team as a community rather than a product. Managers utilized content design to foster feelings of inclusion, uniqueness, and belonging that could endure across seasons and platforms.

The participants also noted that tailoring content to specific platforms reinforced its impact, especially when they allowed material to remain native to its original context. Teams avoided cross-posting content that would not translate well across demographics, ensuring that the audience experience remained consistent with platform expectations.

DHP3 articulated this logic, explaining: “We might have certain pieces of content that are exclusive, for lack of a better term on TikTok, that just won’t even—we won’t bother moving to Facebook, because we know it won’t resonate with that audience as much.”

This content discipline allowed teams to maintain brand clarity while adapting tone and pacing to match each platform’s culture. Managers recognized that platform segmentation offered marketing efficiency and helped preserve the authenticity of their audience relationships. Teams sustained credibility and enhanced engagement across all segments of their digital base by respecting audience preferences.

Content strategy also reflected long-term organizational shifts, particularly in how teams balanced historical branding with innovation and future-facing storytelling.

Participants described how their content units collaborated with marketing departments to craft narratives that acknowledged the past while signaling change. DHP3 shared how this dual identity was managed:

Our content team is under communications versus marketing, so we work very closely with the marketing team to identify what we’re trying to accomplish... coming out of this Centennial, the directive is we’re moving into a new century of [redacted team’s] hockey.

The quote reveals a deliberate pivot toward generational storytelling while preserving institutional continuity. Managers used digital platforms as cultural bridges, linking tradition with transformation. These brand narratives were carefully constructed to honor past fans while opening new channels for younger, more fluid audiences.

Several participants described how entertainment value and production quality shaped how fans experienced the brand, both inside and outside the arena. Teams approached content as a cross-channel experience that merged physical and digital formats. DHP5 explained:

We produce assets for social and other entities, but we also produce assets for an arena. So the stuff that's on the scoreboard, that's on 360 rings, all of that... making sure that everything looks good and that we provide entertainment that people want to see, whether it be half-time stuff, games, or break stuff with different partners.

These media assets ensured continuity in the fan experience across platforms and environments. Teams recognized that content cohesion spanning from TikTok to the jumbotron enhanced the immersive quality of fandom. This integration of social and in-venue storytelling reflected a broader commitment to unified brand aesthetics and fan-centered design.

Finally, participants discussed how analytics shaped both storytelling and content direction. Video performance, time-on-screen data, and social feedback became inputs for understanding audience preferences and crafting more resonant narratives. DHP5 described this approach, saying:

Of course, with video views that come with time watching videos, it also lets us know how we should frame our storytelling. If people are interested, they stay and watch the videos for longer. Okay, you may be interested in this player, this community, community outreach, or this small business.

These insights were then translated into editorial choices that amplified high-engagement topics. By combining performance data with cultural instincts, marketing teams shaped strategy in ways that reflected both audience sentiment and brand objectives. This data-informed creativity became a foundational method for designing content that not only reaches fans but also retains them.

Subtheme 3.3: International Expansion and Localization

Participants emphasized that global expansion required a balance between extending the team's international visibility and preserving the strength of its local identity. Organizations invested in dedicated global outreach strategies, using language-specific channels, regional fan clubs, and international partnerships to grow audiences abroad. DHP1 described the formalization of this effort, explaining:

We're continuing that but expanding it even further, so we're also going into global outreach. So, we work with an outsourcing organization, and we've started building Spanish-speaking social media channels. We launched a Portuguese-speaking channel. So growing this fan base abroad is also a big thing for us.

These initiatives allowed teams to build continuity with fans who shared cultural or linguistic connections, even if they were geographically distant from the team's core market. Rather than treating international reach as a generic brand expansion, organizations constructed digital environments that reflected the cultural preferences and media habits of target regions, positioning international fans as authentic stakeholders rather than peripheral viewers.

Teams viewed international expansion as an opportunity to extend fandom through global storytelling while still reinforcing ties to home-based communities. Participants described a dual focus on local loyalty and international curiosity, where global outreach complemented rather than displaced core brand identity. DHP6 reflected on this alignment, saying:

We're trying to be more global and just be fun and be something that people would want to see in general, even outside of having it be sports-specific. But that's not necessarily our main focus. Our main focus is more so sort of that that localized [redacted city] group.

DHP6's comment highlights the tension and synergy between global visibility and local relevance, suggesting that international reach is treated as an extension of the team's community footprint rather than as a separate audience silo. Teams approached globalization as a community-building tool that could connect remote fans back to a shared origin point.

One of the more prominent strategies for international growth involved empowering existing fans who had relocated to serve as local brand ambassadors. These organically formed fan clubs allowed the team's identity to be reproduced in new markets through personalized social networks and cultural familiarity. DHP6 described this process in detail:

I know they do the Browns Backers program as well. We have a London [redacted team] club. The woman who won our international fan of the year this

year moved to London and started one of these [redacted team] bars. It has become the most popular [redacted team] bar in London.

The story illustrates how fandom can migrate with people and regenerate in new environments through social rituals, watch parties, and shared storytelling. Teams supported these grassroots structures and then amplified them through formal marketing recognition rather than imposing a top-down model of global fandom.

The participants explained that the success of these fan-driven initiatives rested on the emotional connection between origin communities and their global extensions. Fans who began their journey in the team's home market often sought ways to maintain that identity after relocating, and teams responded by giving them platforms to do so. DHP5 reflected on their use of emotional throughline, stating, "So that way, like connecting people back, if they originated as fans here, but can now bring it to people abroad. That has been something that's been something that's been a huge focus of our marketing team." DHP5's comment reinforces the idea that international expansion is more about emotional continuity than about geographic conquest. Teams built relational infrastructure that allowed fans to carry their loyalty into new contexts while fostering community around shared heritage. These strategies aligned internationalization with narrative consistency and legacy reinforcement.

Evidence Supporting Theme 3 from Organizational Documents

Sports organizations strategically leverage social media as a tool for global expansion, enabling them to reach audiences far beyond local markets. By using digital platforms, teams create content that is easily shareable, culturally adaptable, and capable

of generating global visibility. This strategy reflects a recognition that today's fan base is not confined to geographic proximity but extends across international borders where digital engagement drives connection. Social media campaigns allow organizations to amplify their brand identity while tailoring messages to diverse cultural contexts, making global audiences feel included in the team's narrative. Figure 3 illustrates how teams employ digital storytelling and international outreach to expand their influence and strengthen connections with fluid fans worldwide.

Figure 3

Marketing to Fluid Fans through International Expansion and Social Media Campaigns

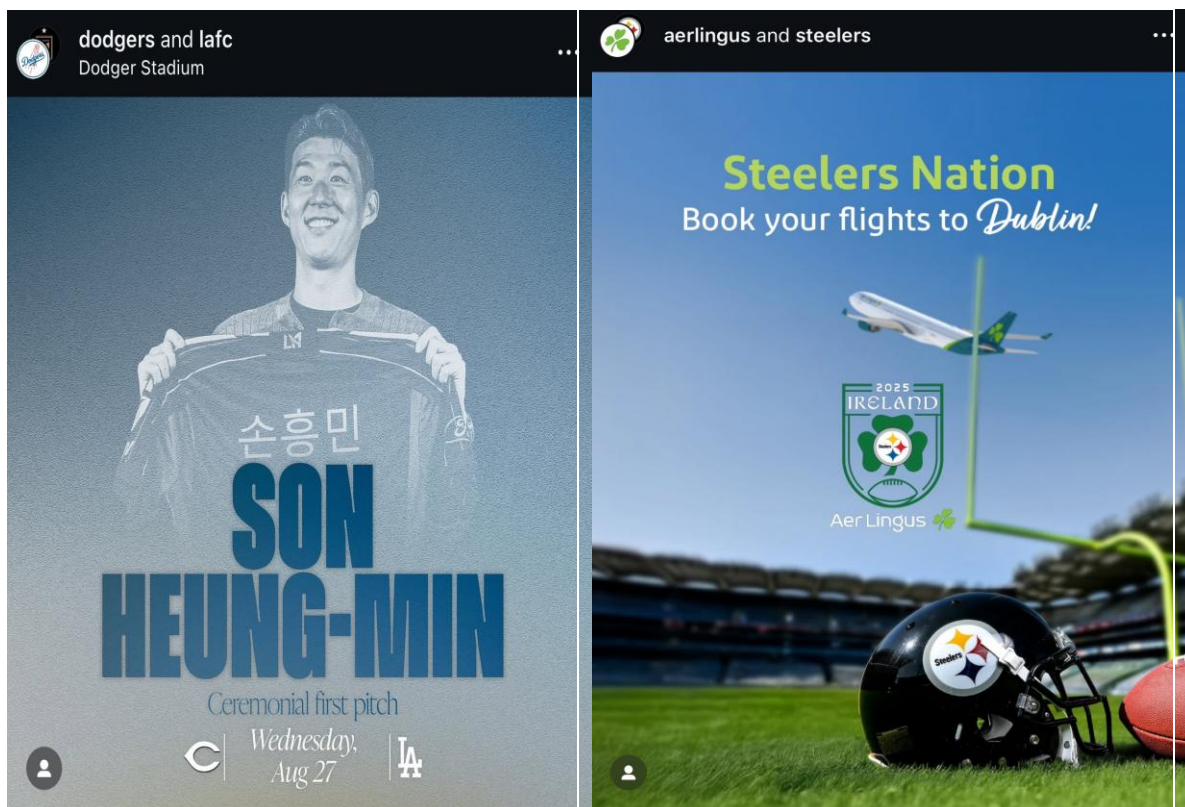


Figure 3 highlights how teams strategically use social media to cultivate global reach and brand expansion. The Los Angeles Dodgers' post featuring Son Heung-Min, a globally recognized South Korean soccer star, reflects a deliberate effort to attract international audiences by leveraging a cross-sport celebrity with a global following. This collaboration demonstrates how sports organizations harness cultural icons to expand their visibility beyond domestic fan bases. Similarly, the Pittsburgh Steelers' partnership with Aer Lingus to promote their 2025 game in Ireland underscores how social media campaigns drive international fan engagement by linking sports experiences to travel and cultural exchange. Together, these examples illustrate how digital platforms enable teams to extend their market presence worldwide, reinforcing that global outreach is now central to cultivating loyalty among fluid fans who transcend geographic boundaries.

The global campaigns in Figure 3 also illustrate how sports organizations adapt to the increasingly borderless nature of fandom. By leveraging Son Heung-Min's international recognition and hosting games abroad, teams extend their visibility into markets where fans may consume sports as global entertainment rather than through local loyalty. This approach creates opportunities to attract fluid fans who engage with multiple sports or leagues, often across continents. The emphasis on travel, cultural exchange, and global icons aligns with how younger, digitally connected fans view sports as part of a broader lifestyle experience. In doing so, organizations not only expand their geographic reach but also position themselves as globally relevant brands within the entertainment economy.

Comparison of Theme 3 to the Academic Literature

The findings from Theme 3 confirm that sports organizations are strategically using social media to engage fluid fans through platform-specific, trend-aware, and globally inclusive content. These findings affirm the work of Dees et al. (2022), who argued that dynamic and interactive content on social media platforms is critical for sustaining engagement with modern sports audiences. The participants described structured efforts to match content style and messaging with platform demographics, a strategy that reflects the tailored engagement practices emphasized by Wymer et al. (2021). Su et al. (2020) noted the importance of short-form, high-impact video for engaging younger fans; the findings in this study validate that this content form has become a core strategy for expanding reach and relevance. TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram Reels emerged as primary entry points for younger audiences into the franchise ecosystem. These insights confirm that sports marketing has undergone a full transition from generalized communication to precision-based audience segmentation driven by platform logic.

The findings extend the literature by illustrating how teams are treating each platform as its own communication ecosystem with differentiated aesthetics, tone, and fan expectations. Whereas previous studies have acknowledged the importance of tailoring content across platforms (Shamayleh & Arsel, 2022), this study adds depth by documenting the operational and strategic decisions that underlie this tailoring. For instance, the findings show that Facebook is reserved for older, more traditional audiences, while TikTok and YouTube serve as gateways for trend-based, culturally attuned engagement. These distinctions move beyond content format into brand identity

management, demonstrating that teams are building multiple parallel narratives to maintain relevance across fragmented digital audiences. This multiplatform strategy contrasts with earlier broadcast-era marketing approaches and reinforces Ramon and Rojas-Torrijos's (2022) argument that the digital age requires ongoing, adaptive storytelling. The findings confirm that such storytelling is increasingly modular, where one narrative does not dominate but rather coexists in various forms across digital spaces.

The findings also support research on the shift toward behind-the-scenes content and experiential storytelling as methods for building fan affinity. Wymer et al. (2021) emphasized that personalized content that showcases athletes' lives beyond gameplay fosters emotional connections with fans, especially among fluid audiences. The study confirms this view by showing that teams produce unique media assets, such as exclusive highlight angles, locker room interactions, and player-driven cultural content, that differentiate their digital identity from generic media outlets. This strategy aligns with the broader movement toward organic, emotionally resonant content in sports marketing described by Zhang (2022) and Kennedy et al. (2021). In contrast to traditional highlight reels or sponsorship-laden promos, these new content forms allow fans to feel a personal stake in the team's story. The findings, therefore, illustrate that personalization and emotional access are no longer optional additions, but foundational principles in marketing to digitally native, identity-driven fans.

The study further contributes to the literature by confirming that global fan engagement requires both international expansion and localized relevance. The literature emphasizes the use of language-specific content, regional fan clubs, and diaspora

outreach to grow sports brands beyond their geographic origins (Mosiara, 2023; Sports Innovation Lab, 2020). This study confirms those claims while providing additional details about how organizations strategically invest in dedicated foreign-language accounts, overseas fan events, and culturally tailored programming. Importantly, the findings highlight that global engagement efforts are not merely additive but are seen as essential to brand growth in saturated domestic markets. This supports Vale and Fernandes's (2018) assertion that real-time engagement and fan inclusivity are keys to international fan development. However, the findings also reveal that teams must balance global visibility with continued investment in local identity, an operational tension less explored in existing research. Thus, the findings both affirm and extend current literature by highlighting the dual imperatives of global expansion and local loyalty.

Ultimately, the findings challenge the assumption that social media content operates independently of broader organizational strategies. While most literature emphasizes social media's function as a content delivery tool (Denisova, 2023), this study found that social media insights are now integrated into pricing strategies, ticketing, sponsorship planning, and even in-game experiences. Analytics derived from social media engagement, such as sentiment, click-through rates, and fan responses to interactive polls, are shared across departments to inform decision-making. This integrated use of data supports He and Li's (2023) argument that social media is increasingly central to a holistic fan engagement strategy. The findings also illustrate the evolution of sports marketing from promotional activity into organizational intelligence. Social media platforms serve as engagement channels and as feedback loops for adaptive

strategy, reinforcing that the future of fan engagement will depend on cross-departmental data coordination and responsiveness to fluid audience behavior.

Interpretation of Theme 3 Using the Conceptual Framework

Sports organizations' internationalization strategies reflect how fans develop fluid identities based on evolving roles in a globalized context. According to the first tenet of identity theory, individuals construct identities from the social roles they inhabit (Stryker, 1980). The findings showed that fluid fans increasingly assume hybrid roles—such as diaspora supporters, multilingual media consumers, or cross-border lifestyle followers—enabled by digital access to global teams. These roles shape how fans affiliate with teams not rooted in their local context but in shared interests, cultures, or values (Levental et al., 2023). Social media channels that cater to language and cultural nuances allow fans to craft identities that feel both individualized and globally connected. The international fan identity is not a secondary role but often a central and self-expressive part of how fluid fans engage with sports brands.

As identity theory's second tenet emphasizes, roles come with embedded behavioral expectations, and international fans bring culturally informed norms into their sports engagement. The findings revealed that marketing teams adapt content and platform use to match localized expectations regarding humor, tone, accessibility, and values (Abele et al., 2021; Chun & Sagas, 2022). For example, fans in Latin America may expect more emotive storytelling, while fans in Asia may engage more with behind-the-scenes content that reflects respect and humility. Sports marketers, aware of these role-based behaviors, curate social media strategies that meet those expectations by hiring

regionally fluent staff or creating language-specific channels. Cultural expectations attached to regional fan identities shape the kinds of behaviors that fans reward and sustain in digital engagement spaces.

Theme 3 also illustrates how identity salience influences which fan identities dominate in different online environments. Identity salience, the third tenet of identity theory, explains why fans activate different affiliations depending on context and personal investment (Stryker & Serpe, 1982; Thoits, 2020). Fans may publicly support a global team on one platform, while privately maintaining loyalty to a local or national franchise in another context. The findings demonstrated that marketing strategies increasingly accommodate this multiplicity by enabling flexible identification—such as toggling between team-specific content and global league narratives. Personalized fan experiences increase the salience of international affiliations without displacing local ties. Sports marketers succeed when they offer fluid fans the space to explore and express identities that fluctuate across geographic, linguistic, and social boundaries.

Finally, the fourth tenet of identity theory emphasizes that social structures help shape identity formation, and Theme 3 findings reveal how global digital infrastructures play that role in modern fandom. Platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram, in conjunction with international streaming services, create standardized channels through which fans receive team messaging across borders (Anglin et al., 2022; Stryker, 1980). At the same time, algorithmic feedback loops and platform norms encourage culturally aligned content, enabling the simultaneous globalization and localization of fan identity. Participants described how social media engagement practices were shaped by the

affordances and pressures of the platforms themselves (Cereda, 2023; Watkins, 2018). These mediated environments become the social structures that guide how fluid fans perform identity and engage across continents.

Business Contributions and Recommendations for Professional Practice

In this section, I present actionable recommendations derived from the study's findings on sports marketing strategies for engaging fluid fans. Each recommendation corresponds to a subtheme identified in the data and is grounded in the behaviors, expectations, and identity dynamics explored through identity theory. These insights can inform professional practice among sports marketing leaders seeking to grow fan engagement, increase brand loyalty, and adapt to changing patterns of sports consumption. The findings address gaps in traditional marketing strategies by highlighting the importance of regional anchoring, player-centered storytelling, and platform-specific content development in fostering enduring relationships with fans whose affiliations are flexible and digitally mediated. Each recommendation offers specific tactics that sports marketers can implement to engage fluid fans across digital platforms, geographic regions, and content types.

Recommendations Based on Theme 1

The findings from Subtheme 1.1 suggest that sports marketing managers can strengthen fan commitment by developing campaigns that highlight regional identity, heritage, and team history. Although fluid fans are characterized by flexibility, many fans still respond to geographically rooted narratives that evoke emotional and cultural pride. Sports marketers should develop storytelling strategies that celebrate the team's origins,

iconic players, and long-standing community ties, positioning the franchise as an enduring cultural symbol. Practical tactics include producing mini-documentaries, integrating historical milestones into digital content, and collaborating with local influencers or community organizations to amplify legacy messaging. These practices can be implemented across platforms, such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, using serialized content formats that engage both nostalgic fans and new audiences. Training modules for digital marketing teams should include strategies for creating localized content, emphasizing how heritage-driven storytelling fosters identity salience and emotional loyalty among fluid fans.

The findings from Subtheme 1.2 reveal that community engagement and cultural alignment are effective strategies for anchoring fluid fans in localized team identities. While fluid fans may lack permanent ties to a region, they often respond positively to messaging that reflects community values, local traditions, and cultural inclusion. Sports marketing professionals should design outreach strategies that connect the team to civic life, including campaigns spotlighting regional food, music, and neighborhood culture. Partnering with local artists, schools, and cultural institutions can reinforce the team's role as a community representative. Marketers should also tailor content to reflect the vernacular, visual symbols, and shared values of local audiences on high-engagement platforms like TikTok and Instagram Stories. Community-themed fan challenges, neighborhood game-day spotlights, and collaborative activations with city initiatives can create stronger emotional bonds. These strategies should be embedded in marketing team

playbooks and regional strategy sessions, emphasizing how cultural integration fosters identity-based affiliation among fans with otherwise fluid loyalties.

The findings from Subtheme 1.3 underscore the importance of reaching youth audiences through regionally framed experiences that are forward-looking, digital-first, and emotionally resonant. While legacy fans often maintain geographic loyalty out of tradition, younger, fluid fans need active pathways to develop local affiliations. Sports marketers should invest in youth-centered content that introduces the team's relevance in the context of school life, pop culture, and family identity. This includes creating age-appropriate, regionally tailored programming such as youth ambassador campaigns, behind-the-scenes youth access content, and digital learning initiatives featuring players engaging with students or educators. Leveraging mobile-first formats and gamified interactions will enhance receptivity among digital-native audiences. Teams should also partner with youth organizations, regional sports academies, and educational institutions to build meaningful associations between the franchise and local youth development. Embedding next-generation strategies in youth outreach and digital planning protocols ensures the long-term sustainability of regional fandom across evolving identity landscapes.

Recommendations Based on Theme 2

The findings from Subtheme 2.1 highlight how player charisma and media visibility act as initial touchpoints for fluid fans entering fandom. Sports marketing managers should design campaigns that position players as athletes and as narrative anchors who introduce new audiences to the team ecosystem. This requires intentional

investment in athlete branding that includes coordinated media training, curated content series, and player-led storytelling across platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. Teams should develop structured content calendars built around players' personalities, community involvement, and lifestyle interests to humanize athletes and appeal to culturally aware, socially engaged fans. Internal strategy documents should reflect a player-as-influencer model that integrates athlete storylines with broader marketing goals. These recommendations can be operationalized through athlete-led digital media teams, player-curated merchandise, and partnerships that amplify off-court visibility to draw fans into a long-term relationship with the team.

The findings from Subtheme 2.2 show that high-profile player acquisitions significantly expand fan bases, especially when teams pair those acquisitions with strategic storytelling and experiential marketing. Sports marketers should align onboarding campaigns for new athletes with broader identity-building efforts, positioning player arrivals as cultural events rather than transactional roster changes. Teams can launch multi-stage content rollouts that include teaser trailers, city-focused welcome campaigns, and fan-centered events that invite community participation. In-arena experiences should reflect the player's brand and cultural resonance, reinforcing emotional attachment and providing fans with both digital and physical touchpoints. Marketing departments should formalize acquisition playbooks that map out multi-platform strategies for maximizing star impact, ensuring that team growth is not limited to short-term hype but converted into sustained engagement. Teams should also evaluate

analytics tied to fan acquisition patterns after major trades or signings to refine future strategies.

The findings from Subtheme 2.3 emphasize that fans increasingly follow players because of their personalities and off-court pursuits. Sports marketing managers should create infrastructure that supports multidimensional athlete storytelling and aligns players' personal interests with team branding. This includes building content studios capable of producing mini-docuseries, podcast interviews, lifestyle features, and brand collaborations that reflect athletes' hobbies, beliefs, and entrepreneurial endeavors. Marketers should integrate player-driven content into seasonal planning to balance game-related promotion with lifestyle branding that attracts fans seeking emotional or ideological resonance. Creating space for athletes to express personal values or participate in social causes also fosters deeper identity alignment among fluid fans. These practices should be reflected in athlete media guidelines, collaborative brand deals, and internal performance indicators that track engagement across diverse fan segments. Long-term, this approach positions the player as a performer and as a platform through which fans experience relevance, authenticity, and a sense of belonging.

Recommendations Based on Theme 3

The findings from Subtheme 3.1 reveal that platform-native content strategies are essential for capturing fluid fans' attention across fragmented digital ecosystems. Sports marketing professionals should formalize platform-specific engagement frameworks that distinguish content tone, format, and pacing based on audience behavior per platform. For example, TikTok strategies should emphasize vertical storytelling, short-form humor,

and music-driven highlights, while Instagram Reels may focus on style, emotion, and personal moments. Marketing teams should conduct routine audits of platform analytics to identify performance patterns and refine creative production accordingly. Cross-functional content teams should be trained to ideate and execute with native fluency, supported by data dashboards that evaluate engagement by channel. These approaches ensure that campaigns feel authentic to each platform and meet fans where they are, maximizing reach, resonance, and conversion.

The findings from Subtheme 3.2 demonstrate that exclusive content, particularly behind-the-scenes access, serves as a critical differentiator in a saturated digital marketplace. Sports marketing teams should establish a premium storytelling layer that offers fans privileged access to team rituals, locker room dynamics, practice footage, travel experiences, and personal athlete routines. These narratives should be designed to generate emotional investment, humanize players, and invite fans into the inner culture of the organization. Marketers should build content vaults with planned rollouts across the season and integrate this material into fan loyalty programs or exclusive access tiers. Teams could also consider forming content partnerships with documentary filmmakers or lifestyle influencers to elevate production quality and broaden distribution. Differentiated content builds depth and meaning into fandom, encouraging sustained engagement beyond game-day highlights.

The findings from Subtheme 3.3 suggest that global audience development requires localized engagement strategies that respect linguistic and cultural nuances. Sports organizations should operationalize international marketing plans that include

region-specific content teams, language-native social channels, and localized fan clubs with tailored messaging. Outreach strategies should be informed by diaspora analysis, regional sports interest data, and cultural relevance audits to ensure resonance. For example, teams expanding in Latin America should hire Spanish-speaking content producers and collaborate with local influencers or athletes to build authentic bridges. Teams should also create globally inclusive content calendars that celebrate international holidays, local traditions, and time zone-friendly digital activations. Investing in internationalization infrastructure enables teams to cultivate sustainable, geographically diverse audiences while maintaining brand coherence and authenticity.

Implications for Social Change

The findings of this study have important implications for advancing the dignity, agency, and personal development of individuals navigating their identities through sports fandom. As fluid fans interact with teams and athletes, they engage in a form of identity construction shaped by community belonging, digital participation, and emotional resonance. Fandom offers a space where individuals can explore and express aspects of themselves that may not find recognition elsewhere. When sports organizations embrace the multiplicity of individuals' roles as supporters, cultural participants, and digital creators, they validate fans as full participants in a broader cultural dialogue. Stryker's (1980) identity theory suggests that individuals' social roles influence their behavior and sense of self, and the findings of this study confirm that the fan role is not peripheral but central for many fluid fans. When organizations reinforce this role through meaningful engagement, they contribute to individual dignity, psychological belonging,

and cultural affirmation, particularly among youth, diaspora communities, and digitally native populations.

At the organizational level, the study's findings suggest that sports franchises can serve as proactive contributors to social inclusion, cultural recognition, and community upliftment. The study's participants emphasized the importance of regionally grounded strategies, personality-based storytelling, and international fan engagement, each of which requires organizations to recognize and respond to cultural diversity. When teams invest in community outreach, content localization, and platform-specific strategies, they amplify the voices and experiences of fans who traditional marketing models may overlook. These practices reflect an understanding of fans as individuals with intersecting cultural, linguistic, and geographic identities rather than consumers. Aligning with identity theory's fourth tenet, which emphasizes the role of social structures in identity enactment (Stryker, 1980), organizations that construct culturally attuned engagement frameworks foster an environment where fans can see their lived experiences mirrored and respected. This validation strengthens social cohesion and offers a blueprint for ethical, inclusive brand behavior.

Beyond the sports industry, the findings support broader implications for civic and cultural life. As teams become hybrid institutions, simultaneously serving as both commercial entities and cultural storytellers, their influence extends into social values, public discourse, and emotional development. Fluid fans often experience parasocial relationships with athletes and develop social identities tied to team affiliation, content consumption, and cultural alignment. When sports marketers use these connections to

promote inclusivity, ethical representation, and emotional intelligence, they can help fans cultivate empathy, community awareness, and digital literacy. These soft skills, developed through fandom, can be applied to fans' real-world relationships, educational aspirations, and civic engagement. In this sense, sports media becomes a vehicle for shaping human capital and social responsibility, especially when content is thoughtfully designed to elevate voices, humanize players, and encourage mutual understanding across lines of difference.

This study supports positive social change by demonstrating that identity-aware marketing strategies can humanize brand-fan interactions and foster inclusive public narratives. Sports marketing professionals have the cultural reach to help fans feel seen, heard, and valued as members of a community with complex, evolving identities. By honoring the role of fandom in individual development and embedding authenticity, purpose, and personalization into their engagement strategies, organizations can help fans cultivate resilience, a sense of belonging, and emotional growth. These outcomes extend into social systems, offering a model for how media and marketing can be leveraged as tools of empowerment. When implemented with intention, these strategies also support stronger communities.

Recommendations for Future Research

Several opportunities exist for future research to build on and extend the findings of this study on how U.S. sports marketing managers maximize fluid fan engagement. One direction involves broadening the participant sample beyond marketing personnel to include fans themselves. While this study captured the strategies organizations use to

attract and retain fluid fans, it did not directly examine how those strategies are received or interpreted by the fans. Future researchers could explore fan perceptions of team branding, storytelling, and social media engagement through interviews, focus groups, or digital ethnography. Comparing organizational intent with fan experience could reveal alignment gaps or confirm the effectiveness of current strategies, offering a more comprehensive view of fluid fandom dynamics.

A second avenue for future research involves expanding the scope to different sports contexts and geographic regions. This study primarily focused on North American team-based sports, which may limit the generalizability of its findings. Researchers could explore fluid fan engagement strategies in global contexts such as international soccer, cricket, or esports, where fan behavior and identity formation may follow different patterns. Additionally, examining how national culture, regional pride, or transnational identity influences sports marketing strategy could yield critical insights into how fluid fandom manifests differently across borders. Cross-contextual comparisons would also allow scholars to identify which methods are universal and which must be adapted to local fan cultures.

Methodologically, future research would benefit from longitudinal and mixed-method designs. The present study was cross-sectional and relied on retrospective interviews with marketing professionals, which may not capture evolving strategic pivots or the full lifecycle of fan conversion. Longitudinal case studies could track how specific campaigns or branding strategies influence fluid fan behavior over time, particularly through analytics, ticket sales, and fan-generated content. Combining interviews with

digital trace data, including engagement metrics, platform sentiment, and purchasing behavior, would strengthen inferences and allow researchers to study how identity salience fluctuates in response to specific marketing interventions. Mixed-methods approaches could also help validate or challenge the current findings by integrating qualitative insights with quantitative performance outcomes.

Future studies could also explore the relationship between fluid fandom and organizational identity from the internal perspective of athletes, coaches, or front-office staff. While this study focused on marketing teams, athletes themselves often serve as primary identity anchors for fluid fans. Understanding how athletes perceive their role in storytelling and branding could inform how organizations co-construct narratives that resonate with both legacy and emerging fan bases. Additionally, researchers could examine how internal staff experience alignment or misalignment with the brand values and cultural messaging that are being publicly communicated. Such research would help illuminate whether the external brand experience matches the internal culture and could provide valuable insights into holistic brand authenticity.

Future research could explore the intersection of identity salience and issues of equity, inclusion, and representation in sports marketing. As fluid fans increasingly engage with teams through values-based and personality-driven content, there is a growing need to understand how race, gender, sexuality, and culture shape fans' identification with players and franchises. Scholars could explore how inclusive storytelling strategies expand access to marginalized fan groups and whether specific identity-based content influences fan loyalty or emotional connection. Studying the

ethical and social dimensions of fluid fan strategy would not only enhance academic understanding but also offer actionable insights for practitioners seeking to foster inclusive, socially responsible brand ecosystems.

Conclusions

In this study, I examined the strategies employed by sports marketing managers to attract, engage, and retain loyal fans in a rapidly evolving digital environment. The findings highlighted how marketing leaders leverage regional identity, player-centric storytelling, and strategic social media use to align their branding efforts with the behaviors and expectations of fluid fan segments. Grounded in Stryker's (1980) identity theory, this study demonstrated how role salience, behavioral expectations, and social structures inform fan identity formation in a landscape increasingly shaped by mobility, media, and personality-driven loyalty. The findings offer practical guidance for sports marketing professionals seeking to build durable emotional connections with diverse fan bases, while also advancing theoretical understanding of how identity processes unfold within contemporary fandom.

The results underscore that successful fan engagement is not a byproduct of scale or media saturation but a reflection of intentional, identity-informed strategy. Marketing managers who localized storytelling, elevated player personas, and tailored their content to platform-specific audiences were better equipped to navigate the complexity of fan identity and loyalty in a fragmented ecosystem. As the sports industry continues to face technological disruption and generational shifts in media consumption, organizations that treat fans as complex identity actors rather than passive consumers will be better

positioned to build lasting affinity and brand equity. This study reinforces the value of adaptive, authentic, and role-aware marketing practices that honor the fluidity and diversity of fan identities. By fostering narratives that reflect fans' values and aspirations, sports organizations can help fans see themselves within the brand, creating relationships grounded in relevance and reciprocity. These practices enhance commercial performance and contribute to positive social change by promoting inclusive representation, cultural engagement, and deeper human connection through sport.

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Appendix A: Informed Consent Form

You are invited to take part in an interview for a study that I am conducting as part of my Doctorate of Business Administration research.

Interview Procedures:

If you agree to be part of this study, you will be invited to take part in an audio-recorded interview about your professional experiences. Opportunities for clarifying statements will be available (via a process called member checking). Transcriptions of interviews will be analyzed as part of the study, along with public documents and records.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

This study is voluntary. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

Being in this study would not pose any risks beyond those of typical daily life. This study's aim is to provide data and insights that could be valuable to people in your profession.

Privacy:

Interview recordings and full transcripts will be shared with each interviewee, upon request. Redacted transcripts with names or sensitive information removed may be shared with my university faculty and my peer advisors. Any reports, presentations, or publications related to this study will share general patterns from the data, without sharing the identities of individual participants or partner organizations. The interview transcripts will be kept for at least 5 years, as required by my university.

Contacts and Questions:

If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call the Walden University Research Participant advocate via 612-312-1210. Walden University's ethics approval number for this study is ____.

Please share any questions or concerns you might have at this time. If you agree to be interviewed as described above, please reply to this email with the words, "I consent."

Appendix B: Participant Invitation Letter

Dear Participant,

There is a new study about strategies that sports franchise marketing managers use to successfully market to fluid fans. For this study, you are invited to describe your experiences with marketing strategies for fluid and in your organization.

About the study:

- One 45-60-minute Zoom interview that will be audio recorded (no video recording)
- To protect your privacy, the published study will not share any names or details that identify you.

Volunteers must meet these requirements:

- Over 18 years old
- Sports franchise marketing manager
- Have at least 4 years of experience in sports marketing
- Have developed successful strategies for marketing to fluid fans

This interview is part of the doctoral study for Dylan Houseworth, a DBA student at Walden University. Interviews will take place during [you will provide the month/timeframe but don't fill this in until you have proposal/IRB approval and are ready to distribute invitations].

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Hello, my name is Dylan Houseworth. I am a Doctoral Candidate with Walden University. The purpose of this interview is to identify and explore strategies you use to market to fluid fans. I am going to ask you nine questions to which I would like your responses to. Then, I will conclude the interview. Do you have any questions?

No.	Question	Alignment
1	What strategies do you use to obtain fluid fans?	Central research question
2	What strategies do you use to retain fluid fans?	Central research question
3	How does maximizing a fluid fan base influence your revenue and market competitiveness?	Central research question
4	How do you identify and market to fluid fans based on their changing identities in sports fandom?	Identity theory: Identity salience
5	In your marketing strategies, how do you address the varying levels of commitment seen in fluid fans?	Identity theory: Commitment
6	What marketing strategies do you use to exploit social hierarchies among fluid fans?	Identity theory: Social hierarchy
7	What marketing strategies do you use to enhance fans' experiences?	Literature review theme
8	What ticketing strategies do you use to market to fluid fans?	Literature review theme
9	How do you incorporate media coverage and promotional activities into your marketing strategies for fluid fans?	Literature review theme
10	How do you leverage social networks and online communities in your marketing efforts to influence or reinforce sports fan identities among fluid fans?	Literature review theme
11	What strategies do you use to personal content marketing to fluid fans?	Literature review theme
12	What challenges have you faced adapting traditional marketing approaches to cater to fluid fans?	Gain new information
13	Based on your experience, what future trends do you anticipate in the behavior of fluid fans, and how are you preparing to respond to these trends?	Gain new information

14	What kind of data and analytics do you use to understand the shifting identities and commitments of fluid fans?	Gain new information
15	How do you gather feedback from fluid fans to inform your marketing strategies and campaign adjustments?	Gain new information
16	Are there any other marketing strategies you use to maximize a fluid fan base that we haven't discussed?	Gain new information

Thank you for participating in the interview, an integral part of my research project.

I will email you a summary of my interpretations of your responses to the interview questions. I would appreciate it if you would review my interpretations, add further clarification if necessary, and reply back to my email.

Appendix D: Table of Primary Codes

Community Codes (Com-)

Code	Description	DHP1	DHP2	DHP3	DHP4	DHP5	DHP6	Total
Com-Access	Access for marginalized or youth groups	3	2	2	2	3	2	14
Com-Event	Community events and celebrations	4	3	4	1	2	3	17
Com-Feed	Community feedback and engagement	3	6	5	5	6	4	29
Com-Part	Partnerships with community organizations	3	4	2	2	7	3	21
Com-Prog	Locally-focused programming	2	1	1	3	2	2	11
Com-Uni	University or student engagement	0	0	1	0	2	1	4

Content Codes (Cont-)

Code	Description	DHP1	DHP2	DHP3	DHP4	DHP5	DHP6	Total
Cont-Local	Localized content for in-person or venue use	4	2	1	3	4	2	16
Cont-Story	Storytelling driven by fan analytics	2	4	2	6	5	4	23
Cont-Trend	Trend-based or pop culture content	4	5	3	5	3	5	25

Fan Codes (Fan-)

Code	Description	DHP1	DHP2	DHP3	DHP4	DHP5	DHP6	Total
Fan-Feedback	Feedback mechanisms to shape content	4	7	4	6	8	6	35
Fan-Fluid	Fluid or shifting fan loyalty	8	9	7	8	12	7	51
Fan-Incentive	Perks and meet-and-greets to attract fans	3	4	1	2	5	3	18
Fan-New	Appealing to non-traditional or new fans	4	3	3	6	8	5	29
Fan-Optics	Visual messaging and perception management	2	3	4	4	3	3	19
Fan-Player	Player-centered fandom	4	8	6	7	6	6	37
Fan-Shift	Conversion of player fans to team fans	2	6	5	4	7	4	28

Game Codes (Game-)

Code	Description	DHP1	DHP2	DHP3	DHP4	DHP5	DHP6	Total
Game-Exp	Game-day experience enhancements	8	5	1	4	8	4	30
Game-Int	Game integration with broader strategy	2	3	2	3	4	3	17

Global Codes (Global-)

Code	Description	DHP1	DHP2	DHP3	DHP4	DHP5	DHP6	Total
Global-Club	Fan club and international chapter development	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Global-Lang	Language and international channel strategy	3	0	0	0	0	0	3
Global-Loc	Local-global fan community connection	3	4	2	2	4	2	17

Influence Codes (Influence-)

Code	Description	DHP1	DHP2	DHP3	DHP4	DHP5	DHP6	Total
Influence-Youth	Influencers used to appeal to youth	5	4	2	3	3	4	21

Platform Codes (Plat-)

Code	Description	DHP1	DHP2	DHP3	DHP4	DHP5	DHP6	Total
Plat-Exclusive	Exclusive or tailored content by platform	2	4	3	4	2	3	18
Plat-Format	Unique content formats by platform	6	5	2	5	4	4	26
Plat-Interact	Interactive platform use	1	3	2	2	4	2	14
Plat-Reach	Extending platform reach to new audiences	3	4	2	5	5	3	22
Plat-Specific	Platform-specific content strategy	6	6	5	7	4	5	33

Player Codes (Player-)

Code	Description	DHP1	DHP2	DHP3	DHP4	DHP5	DHP6	Total
Player-OffCourt	Off-court personality or interests	4	6	3	8	3	5	29
Player-Star	Star power acquisition or value	2	4	3	3	6	3	21

Regional Codes (Reg-)

Code	Description	DHP1	DHP2	DHP3	DHP4	DHP5	DHP6	Total
Reg-Campaign	Regionally focused marketing campaigns	2	2	1	2	4	2	13
Reg-Core	Core fan loyalty and support	3	4	6	5	5	4	27
Reg-Cult	Cultural identity tied to region	3	2	4	4	2	3	18
Reg-Exp	Regional expansion and outreach	2	1	1	1	6	2	13
Reg-Loc	Local and regional fan connection	4	3	3	3	4	3	20
Reg-Price	Pricing strategy related to regional access	1	1	0	1	7	1	11
Reg-Youth	Youth-focused fan development	6	3	2	4	3	4	22

Strategy Codes (Strat-)

Code	Description	DHP1	DHP2	DHP3	DHP4	DHP5	DHP6	Total
Strat-Adapt	Message flexibility based on performance	3	5	4	6	3	4	25
Strat-Data	Using data to inform content or strategy	5	4	3	4	6	3	25
Strat-Detail	Tactical visual or experiential adjustments	2	3	2	3	4	2	16
Strat-Future	Forward-looking strategic planning	4	3	4	4	4	3	22
Strat-Growth	Market or audience growth strategy	4	2	3	5	6	3	23
Strat-Int	Cross-departmental integration of strategy	3	4	3	4	5	3	22
Strat-Tactic	Tactical adjustments like theme nights	4	2	1	2	4	2	15
Strat-Tone	Adjusting tone based on fan mood or conditions	2	4	4	6	2	3	21