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Championing Superstars in the Digital Era: The Efficacy of Player Promotion as a Strategic Marketing Approach for Improving Fan Engagement and Sponsorship Recall in the Premier League

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ABSTRACT

The thesis explores how promoting "superstar" players affects fan engagement, and subsequently, sponsorship recall amongst Premier League fans, focusing on how fandom intensity moderates these relationships. The research question guiding the study is: *"How does the promotion of "superstar" players affect fan engagement, and subsequently, sponsorship recall? Additionally, how does the level of fandom intensity moderate the relationship between fan engagement and sponsorship recall?"*. The study applies a qualitative approach, utilizing 12 in-depth semi-structured interviews with Premier League fans of varying levels of fandom intensity, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of the nuanced relationships between player promotion, fan engagement, and sponsorship recall.

The findings indicate that promoting "superstar" players considerably increases fan engagement. Fans seem to prefer player-promoted advertisements over traditional ones, especially when authentic and aligned with team values. Highly engaged fans display a better sense of sponsorship recall, especially for high-visibility sponsors like stadium and shirt sponsorships. The findings also show that the level of fandom intensity plays a central role in the relationship between fan engagement and sponsorship recall, as fans with a high level of fandom intensity tend to be more engaged with content, leading to a better overall sense of sponsorship recall.

Conclusively, the research argues that leveraging player personalities effectively increases overall fan engagement and sponsorship recall in the Premier League. The thesis contributes to sports marketing literature by exploring these effects, which have yet to be extensively studied, especially within the Premier League context. Future research is encouraged within other leagues and cultural contexts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

The sports marketing landscape has undergone a paradigm shift as a result of the immense development in the digital sphere in recent years. The meteoric rise of social media and the global connectivity that it has brought has permanently transformed the way sports are consumed. The relationship between sports leagues, social media platforms, professional athletes, and their respective fan bases has consequently been reformed, thus paving new roads for fan engagement and brand promotion.

Sports marketing does not have a clear definition on what it concerns, although a definition from *Shilbury et. al (2020)* explains it quite accurately from a sports organizational point of view, *"Sport marketing is a social and managerial process by which the sport manager seeks to obtain what sporting organizations need and want through creating and exchanging products and value with others."*. In likeness with other forms of marketing, sports marketing aims to satisfy the consumer´s current desires and needs by presenting them with the access to goods and services related to sports. However, *Mohammadkazemi (2018)* states that sports marketing differs from traditional marketing, since it can also promote the use of non-sport-related goods and services through association. This is certainly an intriguing aspect for sports marketers to dive deeper in and grasp a better understanding of.

To specify the scope of the sports marketing landscape, it can be intriguing to go into the domain of football, the world's biggest sport. Firstly, football fans tend to show more enthusiasm for their favorite football team than for example individuals express for their favorite product *(Bühler et. al, 2006)*. The reason behind this passion and loyalty is because fans view the game as an escape from everyday life, where the excitement of a live match and the overall sense of belonging they get is not attainable through any other facets of life. Consequently, football fans can be considered to partake more often in irrational consumer behavior than an average consumer *(Dempsey & Reilly (1998), as cited in Bühler et. al (2006))*.

A glaring trend that can be observed in the social media sphere is that footballers are some of the individuals with the most social influence of anyone. Superstar footballers such as David Beckham, Kylian Mbappe, and Neymar are three footballers that have all cracked the prestigious 50 most-followed Instagram accounts in the world, having over 400 million followers amongst themselves *(NotCommon, 2024)*. And of course, who could forget the two most-followed individuals on the planet, Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo, amounting a total of 1.1 billion followers together *(Social Blade, 2023)*. These colossal numbers underline the profound influence

that footballers have in transforming contemporary culture and driving societal narratives. Their influence goes over and beyond their sport, leading them to the possibility of connecting with a global audience.

Messi's arrival to the MLS (Major Soccer League) in 2023 is a prominent example of how companies are realizing the immense impact of a sporting figure such as the Argentinian. According to *Silverman (2023)*, the MLS and Apple had recently entered a 10-year, $2.5 billion commitment for Apple TV to be the exclusive platform for every MLS match. In addition to the colossal contract given from Inter Miami CF worth $50 million every year, Messi also cut a deal with Apple, giving him a partial stake in all international subscriptions sold for the whole MLS season *(Silverman, 2023)*. Messi's successful negotiation of this lucrative contract with Apple and Inter Miami CF highlights how much modern companies value global superstars in order to expand their own brands. This phenomenon is closely linked to the rise of celebrity culture, where the reach of an athlete like Messi does not stop in the sporting arena.

The contemporary phenomenon of celebrity culture has astronomically risen as a result of the growth of social media. In accordance with this phenomenon, *Couldry (2003), (as cited in Driessens, (2014))* termed the "*myth of the mediated center*": *the myth that the media are the gatekeepers to an imagined social center, of which celebrities are an important element, and is thereby distinguished from 'non-media' or 'ordinary' people.* Considering that celebrities were already an integral part of the communication process 20 years ago, one can only imagine the role they play in today's digital renaissance. In relation to the sporting world, the escalation of media coverage has increased the visibility of athletes, breaking the previous mold of consumers only being able to follow their favorite players on traditional sports broadcasts to now being able to follow them through social media, interviews, documentaries, and other various content, practically giving them 24/7 access to these public figures. In recent years, we can also see an increasing trend in athletes' desire in building their personal brand by promoting their public image and wanting to show off their personality, lifestyle, and interests to their fans. Social media has given athletes a golden opportunity to communicate directly to their followers, thus giving them a greater chance of coming across as relatable and agreeable to the public. As mentioned earlier, the influence of athletes reaches beyond the sporting domain, opening up opportunities to cross over to domains such as fashion, entertainment, lifestyle, and philanthropy as well. Being present in various domains increases the likelihood of the athlete becoming an influential figure in popular culture.

In the context of the biggest sports leagues in the world, the Premier League, which is the highest division of football in England, is considered to be at the forefront. In the last year, the Premier League surmounted a total revenue of 6.6 billion euros, almost twice as much as their closest competitors, LaLiga and the Bundesliga

(Deloitte, 2023). Being broadcasted globally in over 800 million homes, 188 countries, 90 broadcasters, and more than 400 channels clearly shows the ongoing dominance of the Premier League in the digital sphere *(Evans, 2022)*. Moreover, one can also see the dominance of the Premier League across social media platforms, whereas 6 of the top 10 football teams in terms of total social media followers in the world reside in the Premier League, with Manchester United FC being the most prominent one, amassing a whopping 225 million followers *(Football Benchmark, 2023)*. Having this in mind, as well as knowing that football is considered to be the "world's game" being the most popular sport, it is clear to see that there is a boundless and lucrative landscape for eventual marketing opportunities for the biggest football league in the world.

Since the scope of this paper is on the influence of individual players in sports leagues, it can also be beneficial to take a look at where Premier League players rank among the world's elite. The *Ballon D'or* is an annual football award presented by French Football that ranks the performances of the 30 best footballers in the world in the past year. This award has been ongoing since 1956 and is regarded to be the most prestigious prize a footballer can receive throughout their career *(Thakur, 2023)*. Looking at the rankings of the *2023 Ballon D'or*, one can see that 12 of 30 (40%) players ranked in the top 30 footballers in the world play in the esteemed Premier League in England *(Hindle, 2023)*. The league that has the second most players is LaLiga, the top-flight in Spain, with only 5 players in comparison. This further proves that the Premier League, being the home to some of the biggest talents in the world, is the most influential league in the world at the moment. Reverting to the previous point about the substantial gap in revenue between the leagues, it appears that this trend is not poised for a decrement in the near future, thus signifying that the Premier League will be host to a plethora of future superstars in the footballing world. Naturally, in the sporting world, there is a clear correlation between the highest performing athletes and the athletes with the greatest amount of social influence.

Research Question

In order to establish a link between the methodological and academic facets of this work, the research question, *"How does the promotion of "superstar" Premier League players influence fan engagement and, subsequently, sponsorship recall? Additionally, how does the level of fandom intensity moderate these relationships?"* will be developed, serving as a guiding principle for the study.

Research Gaps in Previous Literature

Previous literature in the sports marketing sphere has taken a look at the influence that sports sponsorships has on fan engagement, brand attitude/allegiance, and purchase intention *(Alexandris et. al., (2012); Funk and James (2001); Abosag et. al. (2012); Delia (2017))*. However, specifying the scope of "superstar" players into sports sponsorships and how this variable affects fan engagement, as well as sponsorship recall, has not been done before. Prior research has also investigated the effects that fandom intensity has on fan engagement, purchase intention, and brand attitude (*Madrigal (2000); Cornwell et. al., (2005); Dalakas and Levin (2005))*. However, there seems to be a lack of understanding in the moderator's (level of fandom intensity) impact on the relationship between fan engagement and sponsorship recall. While several studies have explored various aspects within fan behavior (*Winell et. al (2022); Numerato and Giulianotti, (2018); Numerato, (2014); Hoegele et. al., (2014))*, there seems to be a lack of research specifically contextualized within the Premier League. By specifying the scope to the Premier League, the eventual findings can give us valuable insights into the intricacies of fan behavior within one of the most followed sports leagues in the world. Previous literature has also looked at the effect that fan engagement has on sponsorship recall *(Roy & Cornwell, (2004); Wakefield & Bennett, (2010); (Cornwell et. al., 2005); Biscaia et. al., (2014))*. Nevertheless, the relationship between the aforementioned variables has not been explored in conjunction with the "player promotion" variable, offering a new angle on previous knowledge of this topic. Lastly, although there has been conducted previous research in relation to the effect of social media on fan engagement (*Phua (2012); Wakefield & Bennett, (2018); Elliott, (2014); Stavros et. al., (2014))*, it appears that there is a lack of an understanding of the influence of "superstar" players on these platforms in terms of fan engagement and subsequently, sponsorship recall.

Managerial Relevance

The goal of the research conducted in accordance with this paper is for it to be relevant for sports/team marketing managers in order to better understand the dynamics of the sports industry, especially when it comes to the ongoing digital revolution and the ever-growing influential sway that individual players have on a global audience. Leveraging the power of player branding and conducting it in an effective way can have an eventual positive effect on fan engagement and sponsorship recall. Conceivably, the eventual findings related to the Premier League can be replicated in similar sports leagues around the world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sports Celebrity Endorsements and Fit in Constructing Sponsorships

According to *Darnell & Sparks (2007)*, sports celebrity endorsements are distinguished by their outstanding athletic performances and the way in which they use this recognition to further market a product or service. A positive attribution in using this as a marketing technique is that consumers' defense mechanisms are lowered towards sports celebrity endorsements, increasing the likelihood of a successful endorsement *(Alexandris et. al., 2012)*. *Kamins (1990)* mentions that athletes are efficacious in being brand ambassadors, as they often can be associated with an aspirational reference group. The "halo effect" is a phenomenon that supports the implementation of celebrities in endorsements. According to the "halo effect", a person who scores highly on an attribute that the consumer values can lead to a positive influence on opinions about other perceived traits of that person *(Asch, 1946)*. Naturally, a consumer in the sporting world will value traits such as exceptional athletic performances, which means that the "halo effect" is in full force and prevalent in the relationship between athletes and consumers.

The Source Credibility Model, developed by *Hovland and Weiss (1951)* is a theoretical framework used to understand how the credibility of a message source influences its persuasive impact on the audience, consisting of two main components: the perceived expertise and trustworthiness of the source from the audience's point of view. Sources that are considered high in expertise and trustworthiness are considered to be more persuasive to an audience than sources that are lower in these aspects. Naturally, in concurrence with the "halo effect", "superstar" athletes are deemed by consumers to have an exceptionally high degree of expertise, thus increasing their persuasive impact. The Source Attractiveness Model, proposed by *McGuire (1985)* asserts that a message's persuasiveness can be independently increased by the physical attractiveness, likeability, and resemblance of its source, regardless of the message's substance. *McCracken (1989)* asserts that neither model is able to fully explain how an endorser and a specific product match. In the first stage of his three-stage model, aspects like culture and image, that are formed in a social context, are assigned to the celebrity. Subsequently, the conveyed meaning is transferred from the celebrity and towards the product in the second stage, and in the third and final level, is transferred from the product to the consumer.

The "match-up hypothesis" *(Kamins, 1990)* suggests that *"endorsers are more effective when there is a fit between the endorser and the endorsed product"*. Distinctiveness theory *(McGuire, 1984)* states that an individual's distinctive traits in relation to other people in their domain are more salient, and result in greater identification with persuasive messages, than commonly found traits in the domain. In concurrence with these

concepts, *Olson & Thjømøe (2011)* argue that establishing a fit, often referred to as congruence, is a fundamental principle in designing and implementing sponsorships. *"Failure to strike a balance between celebrity endorsement and brand image can confuse the consumer and lead to a negative attitude towards the brand" (Charbonneau & Garland, 2010).* The alignment of the sponsor and organization are crucial factors to consider when improving sponsorship recognition, and subsequently, sponsorship recall *(Cornwell et. al., 2006)*. These theories further support the profound impact that celebrity endorsers can have on its consumers, especially if there is a strong fit and a distinct message being conveyed. Conversely, *(Törn, 2012)* states the contrary, in that a favorable impact on attitude, purchasing decisions, or positive word-of-mouth can be achieved by a slight or complete mismatch in fit. Studies have also shown that celebrity endorsements do not directly affect the equity of the brand, and it can instead improve the brand´s trustworthiness, which can eventually lead to an increase in brand equity *(Spry et. al., 2011)*. A different study takes a look at the effects of a celebrity endorsing one too many products in the eye of the consumer, showing that it lowers the celebrity's credibility and trustworthiness as well as the general attitude towards the brand in question *(Tripp et. al., 1994)*.

Sedky et. al (2020) investigated the influence that star athletes can have on attracting audiences to their respective sport. In 2016, an Egyptian taekwondo player won a bronze medal at the Rio Olympics, projecting her and the sport of taekwondo to the peak of media coverage back in her home country. However, as the months went by, the interest in the athlete and the sport went spiraling downward, proving that in today's day and age, athletes need to continuously perform at the highest of levels in order to stay attractive in the eyes of the media and its consumers. *"The successful and winning athletes are considered the best endorsers, because their talent represents to customers high quality, high performance and guarantee of success." (Melo Neto, 1995)*. Moreover, *Dix et. al (2010)* explored how sports celebrities serve as role models and influence the purchase and behavioral intentions of young adult consumers in Australia. The findings of the authors indicated that sports celebrities positively affect behaviors such as product switching, word of mouth, and brand loyalty.

Impact of Commercialization on Fan Dynamics

Winell et. al (2022) discuss the complex and dynamic nature of commercialization in sports, where they mention that the sports industry may encounter severe resistance at times, as for example back in 2021 when the elite football clubs in Europe tried to create the European Super League or the debate of allowing sponsorship within college sports in the US . These are only two unique examples that highlight the significant "voice" that fans have in the context of commercialization in sports.

Numerous instances demonstrate how doubtful fans are becoming of the growing commercialization within professional sports. For example, supporters might observe how their preferred team collaborates with new sponsors, establishes new interaction channels, or increases ticket costs to guarantee profits *(Thani and Heenan, 2017)*. This can have a detrimental impact on fan engagement and their overall perceived worth of associating with the team. Fans' roles as active participants in sports may occasionally be replaced by those of passive consumers if they believe that commercial principles have taken over their sport, team, or athlete *(Numerato and Giulianotti, 2018)*. In recent years, the commercialization of football has led to many fans linking it to high-risk business dealings that can potentially put the sustainability of their own club in serious jeopardy, both economically and morally, as several clubs have been partnering with immoral sponsors or engaging in illegal activity *(Kiernan, 2015)*. Moreover, fans bemoan the commercialization of their genuine feelings towards a club and transforming it into a business, shifting them from supporters to prospects, leaving them feeling alienated from their true identity in the club *(Numerato, 2014)*. In general, supporters perceive themselves as the true moral club owners, as opposed to the players/investors/etc. as they support their team regardless of the situation *(Porter, 2014)*. According to *Funk and James (2001)*, fans' identification with their team moves through several phases (awareness, attractiveness, connection, and loyalty), resulting in a dynamic relationship, contingent on the context of the current situation. Consequently, the findings of this paper may produce different results when replicated in the future if the fan-team identification has shifted in any capacity.

In terms of fan identity, some studies highlight the effect that commercialization can have in globalizing fan identities. Nowadays, one can see that both sports organizations and players are striving to globalize their fan bases to achieve commercial expansion *(Kerr and Emery, 2011)*. *Abosag et. al. (2012)* indicates that fans can view the commercialization of their team in a positive light, as it will bring in more revenue for the team, thus increasing their chances of winning and success in the future. According to *Petersen-Wagner (2017)*, fan individualization is fueled by commercialization. This finding may indicate that, in contrast to the past tendency of moving towards a community-focused self-identification, fans are increasingly creating their own identities through the utilization of commercial elements that best suit their own proclivity. Fan identification has shifted since the birth of global superstars, resulting in some fans perceiving the individual superstars as more integral to their sense of self than the actual team *(Hoegele et. al., 2014)*. These insights are crucial in relation to the research being conducted, as the growing trend of fan individualization can have a significant impact on the dependent variables at hand.

In relation to how sponsors affect fan identification, *Delia (2017)* wanted to research further into the cycling world and how sponsorships can become an important part of a fans' identity. According to *Delia (2017)*, in a sport such as cycling, where the sponsors of a team have a close relationship with the team, fans may identify and feel close to the sponsor even after the commercial agreement between the team and sponsor is over, a so-called "legacy effect". This finding supports the notion that it could be beneficial for a brand to continue sponsoring a sports team over an extended period in order to reap long-term benefits from it. In concurrence, *Farrelly et. al., (2005) & McAlister et. al., (2012)* note that forming sponsorship agreements that are long-lasting can aid sponsors in attaining brand uniqueness.

Sponsorship performance relies heavily on how much the fan identifies themselves with the brand and message being conveyed. According to *Madrigal (2000)*, highly engaged fans are more likely to purchase sponsor brands, especially if it is a common practice within the fanbase. Highly engaged fans are also more inclined to perceive their team's identity in the brand sponsor, through means of image transfer *(Cornwell et. al., 2005)*. Fans that possess a greater sense of knowledge about sports leagues will process more sponsorship information than less knowledgeable fans, as well as being more inclined to seek out information about the sponsors *(Roy & Cornwell, 2004; Wakefield & Bennett, 2010)*. In concurrence with these concepts, Evaluative Consistency (EC) anticipates that fans who have higher degrees of identification with the team will feel a sense of empathy and goodwill to the team sponsor *(Madrigal, 2001)*. As established by Congruence Theory (CT), there is a high likelihood that fans with a high sense of identification seek to have their beliefs in sync, leading to them viewing the sponsors of a team in the same light as their beloved team *(Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1955)*. Conversely, *Dalakas and Levin's (2005)* study explored the conflicts that can arise if highly engaged fans of a certain team, who typically harbor animosity or even hatred to rival teams, transfer these feelings over to the sponsors of rival teams.

One of the most common methods for evaluating sponsorship effectiveness is brand recall, as *Keller (1993)* mentions. Brand recall is *"a consumer's ability to recall a brand when given the product category, the needs fulfilled by the category, or some other type of probe as a cue" (Keller, 1993)*. To differentiate oneself from its competitors, brands need to prioritize becoming more memorable than their rivals in the market *(Baumann et. al., 2015)*. Therefore, increasing the likelihood of recall occurring is one of the main objectives of a sponsorship deal, since it improves other elements like improving brand image, fostering favorable behavioral consumer behavior, and eventually, boosting profits *(Crompton, 2004; Ko et. al., 2008)*. Therefore, from the sponsor's viewpoint, understanding the level of recognition and recall that sports fans have/can have towards your brand is crucial in valuing the return on investment in a potential deal *(Biscaia et. al., 2014)*.

Considering that sponsors involved in football sponsorships aim for the associated brands to be "top-of-mind" with sports fans *(Maxwell & Lough, 2009)*, it is important to consider fans' behavior to their teams, as this can have a significant effect on sponsorship awareness and recall *(Biscaia et. al., 2014)*. The brands that were considered most often as top-of-mind" sponsors were primarily the brands that had their logos on the club jersey, whereas sponsors utilizing different brand touchpoints were considerably less identified *(Biscaia et. al., 2014)*. Lastly, they note that securing rights to name the stadium is essential for achieving significant levels of recall *(Biscaia et. al., 2014)*.

Social Media's Effect on Fan Engagement

The usage of social media in the sports industry, a domain that relies heavily on emotional effect, has increasingly become more and more relevant in the past 10 years due to its high graphic, visual, and interactive content *(Hull & Abeza, 2021)*. Through the use of social media, celebrities and consumers can interact with each other instantaneously, opening up the possibility for stable parasocial relations to be constructed between the two individuals *(Aw & Labrecque, 2020)*. According to *Phua (2012)*, there is a direct correlation between fans that have a high usage on social media platforms and high levels of fan identification with their team. Relationship marketing theory, as defined by *Abeza and Sanderson (2022) "is based on the idea that a relationship between two parties creates additional value for those involved"*. This approach, which is amongst the most prevalent in the sports industry for social media marketing, stresses the value of developing profound, positive relationships between the two parties in order to attain long-term commercial success.

Sports teams should pay particular attention to valence when utilizing social media to interact with their followers, as satisfied fans are far more inclined to share and engage with content than dissatisfied ones *(Wakefield & Bennett, 2018)*. Nonetheless, fans' experiences are disposed to fluctuate over time, as the team's performances may impact the overall fan interactions on social media *(Santos et. al., 2019)*. Social media platforms, through the process of preferences, retweets, shares, personalization, and upvotes, play a pivotal role in advancing the participatory culture and sense of groupism among football fans *(Elliott, 2014)*. In addition to giving fans a chance to express themselves in a proper way, social media also helps sports teams better understand fan motivations in order to intensify the fan-team relationship *(Stavros et. al., 2014)*, thus highlighting the importance of diving deeper into the relationship between sports fans and social media platforms.

Research Questions

In order to be able to explore the complex relationships between player promotion, fan engagement, and sponsorship recall, the study is guided by the following research questions.

RQ 1: How does the promotion of "superstar" players affect fan engagement, and subsequently, sponsorship recall?

RQ 2: How does the level of fandom intensity moderate the relationship between fan engagement and sponsorship recall?

METHOD

Research Design - Qualitative Method

Owing to the lack of previous studies examining the effect of the aforementioned variables in a profound and in-depth manner, a qualitative approach was chosen for this study. The purpose of conducting exploratory interviews is to obtain a better understanding of the latent motives that might be revealed in relation to fan engagement and sponsorship recall. Since the majority of the previous literature in this field has been quantitative, a qualitative method may be better suited to identify gaps in the prior research than a quantitative analysis. Given the complex interplay between fan perceptions, marketing strategies, and sponsorship effectiveness in the digital era, in-depth interviews, containing open-ended questions, serve as a rich medium for gathering nuanced perspectives and deeper understandings. Closed-ended survey questions could miss substantial, contextual information that could alter the overall findings. In-depth fan interviews also allow for a deeper expression of emotions, connections, and identities, offering a more complex picture of how fans interact with content that is promoted by professional athletes, and subsequently, how well they are able to recall sponsors within this scope. Therefore, due to the nuanced and heavily emotional nature of fan engagement in the sporting domain, a qualitative method is seen as the more viable method in order to better understand the intricacies of the phenomenon in discussion.

In-Depth Interviews

The data will be collected through semi-structured interviews, as *"it has been proven to be a versatile and flexible method" (Kallio et. al., 2016)*. Through open-ended questions and probing discussions, it opens up the possibility to dive deeper into the intricacies of fan-player relationships, the impact of promotional content on fan engagement, and the memorability of sponsored content. Rather than solely adhering to predetermined subject areas, qualitative techniques empower the participants to introduce concepts of importance to the interviewer, some that might have been unknown for the interviewer beforehand. The interviews will consist of a set of predetermined questions, based on the prior knowledge from the literature review, and in accordance with the research objectives. It will also consist of improvised follow-up questions, depending on the response from the participant. However, it is important that the information gathered from all participants do not differ too much from one another, hence avoiding the possibility of a dispersed analysis. Therefore, an interview guide was made before conducting the interviews, giving it a structural framework to follow, thus ensuring that in the bigger picture, similar information is collected from all participants.

Population Selection and Sample Size

When choosing the appropriate population for the research at hand, it was of utmost importance to ensure that the selected sample size was an accurate representation of an average group of Premier League fans. The passions and opinions of the participants needed to reflect the typical Premier League fan in order for the results of the study to be valid within the contextualization of the Premier League. In order to properly test the moderator, level of fandom intensity, it was paramount to recruit Premier League fans of varying fandom levels. To accurately assess the moderator's influence in the study, fans encompassing low, medium, and high levels of fandom intensity were recruited for the sample size.

Purposeful sampling is *"a technique widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources" (Patton, 2002)*. According to *Cresswell & Plano Clark (2011)*, this entails choosing a group of individuals who are particularly aware and invested in a topic of interest, which in this case, would be purposefully choosing Premier League fans. Therefore, a purposeful sampling strategy was used in this study to ensure the inclusion of participants with varying levels of fandom intensity. This allowed for a well-rounded review of viewpoints within the Premier League fan community. Considering the research topic at hand, it was deemed appropriate to include a larger proportion of young individuals in the sample size, as they are typically more active on social media, aligning with the scope of the research. This type of sampling improved the study's capacity to thoroughly address its research questions and produce insightful information for theoretical development and practical applications within the field.

Lastly, when it comes to the sample size of the study, it has previously been recommended that qualitative research reaches data saturation within the range of 9-17 interviews *(Hennink & Kaiser, 2022)*. According to *Hennink & Kaiser*, this was particularly relevant for studies with relatively homogeneous populations and narrowly defined research objectives. Looking at the research at hand, one could say that the population is homogeneous *(Premier League fans)* and that the research objectives are narrowly defined *(Fan behavior to player promotion and sponsors)*. This justifies utilizing this range of interviews as a framework when assessing the data saturation in the data collection process. After performing 12 interviews for the study, data saturation began to present itself, hence allowing the data collection process to conclude with a total of 12 participants.

Interview Structure

The estimated length of every interview was approximately 30 to 35 minutes, depending on the extent to which the participant responded to each of the questions. As mentioned earlier, an interview guide was created in order to ensure comparable discussions between each of the participants. However, no two interviews were identical, as the follow-up questions that were asked to each of the questions led to a different discussion on every occasion. Some examples of follow-up questions that were asked to probe and dig deeper into the participant's frame of thinking were, *"Can you provide an example or incident that illustrates your experience/perspective?", "How did that make you feel? What motivated you to respond in that manner?, "You mentioned [previous statement]. However, earlier you also stated [different viewpoint]. Can you explain the disparity between the two statements?" or "What intrinsic motivations or beliefs influence your standpoint on this topic?".*

The interview guide's format was divided into six sections, each contributing to the overall understanding of the topic at hand. The interview began with background questions about the interviewee's life and fandom, including how they became a Premier League fan, if they have any sporting idols they look up to, how frequently they watch Premier League content on social media, etc. The relationship between player promotion and fan engagement would be examined in the second section, while the relationship between fan engagement and sponsorship recall would be examined in the third section of the interview guide. The testing of the mediator, level of fandom intensity, comprised the fourth section. In the fifth section, the interviewee was asked to judge mock-up Premier League promotional material and comment on which of the advertisements would have the biggest impact on their own fan engagement and sponsorship recall. Lastly, the sixth part consisted of asking the interviewee if they had any other experiences or opinions as a Premier League fan related to these topics that they would like to add, and if they had nothing more to mention, the interview would be concluded.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to the interview process, all participants were informed of the aim and topic of the research project at hand. In order for the researcher to be fully present throughout the interview process, all the interviews were audio recorded. Participants were informed that the recordings would solely be used for this research, and that it would be deleted after the thesis process had been concluded. Regarding privacy concerns, each respondent was made anonymous and was asked to come up with an alias to use. In order to clearly differentiate the twelve respondents from one another, the researcher asked the respondent who their favorite player in the Premier League was, and if it was approved by them, this would become their alias. Lastly, the respondent was made aware that they had the option to withdraw themselves and their data from the interview process at any moment in time. If the participant agreed to all of these conditions, they provided their consent for the interview to proceed.

Analytical Approach

The thematic analysis approach, developed by *Braun & Clarke (2006)*, has been chosen as the outline for the steps to follow when analyzing the results of the data originating from the in-depth interviews. This six-phase method allows the researcher to find, examine, and summarize the overall themes of the collected data, as well as not limiting the analysis to follow either an inductive or deductive approach *(Braun & Clarke, 2006)*. These steps must be taken in order to fulfill the thematic analysis approach.

Phase 1 consists of the researcher familiarizing and immersing themselves with the data, Phase 2 consists of the researcher identifying relevant topics and assembling the overall findings into purposeful categories, Phase 3 consists of identifying themes within these categories, Phase 4 consists of producing a thematic map of the analysis, Phase 5 consists of refining and defining the themes and establishing clear definitions of the themes, and lastly, Phase 6 consists of generating definitive results based on the established themes *(Braun & Clarke, 2006)*. The use of this well-known approach will anticipatively lead to clear and concise findings to the research questions raised in the study.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The findings of the conducted interviews will be presented in accordance with the different sections of the interview guide as mentioned above. Thus, the first section will consist of a table of all the participants (with alias names) and the level of fandom intensity (based on a scale from 1-10 from the interview). These two factors are considered the only relevant information needed when conducting the analysis of the participants. The second section will analyze the relationship between player promotion and fan engagement, the third section will analyze the relationship between fan engagement and sponsorship recall, the fourth section will analyze the mediator's overall effect on the relationship between fan engagement and sponsorship recall, the fifth section will analyze the results of the Premier League mock-up promotional material, and lastly, the sixth section will consist of a table summarizing the results of the research findings.

List of Participants and Level of Fandom Intensity

NUMBER	ALIAS	FANDOM INTENSITY
1	Højlund	HIGH
2	Haaland	LOW
3	Varane	HIGH
4	Nunez	MEDIUM
5	Bruno	MEDIUM
6	Van Dijk	HIGH
7	Mainoo	MEDIUM
8	Martinelli	HIGH
9	Garnacho	HIGH
10	Heung-Min Son	LOW
11	Palmer	MEDIUM
12	Alexander-Arnold	LOW

Note: Based on a self-appointed scale from 1-10 in the interview guide

1 to 4 = LOW

5 to 7 = MEDIUM

8 to 10 = HIGH

Player Promotion and Fan Engagement

In this section of the interview guide, the dynamic relationship between these two variables are explored in order to attain a better understanding of the overall topic at hand. The respondents' answers underscore the complexity of the relationship, highlighting that fans attitudes towards player promotion are far from clear-cut.

The nuanced nature of this relationship is supported in the perspectives shared by respondents such as *Garnacho*, calling it *"a double-edged sword"*, as well as *Højlund*, who mentions, *"It depends greatly on what they are promoting. The most important for me is that club values emerge before individual player values. So I would rather prefer an advertisement with three players from the same club, showing team togetherness, rather than one superstar player promoting a brand by themself. So basically, the authenticity of the message greatly depends on how I look at player promotion on social media."*. From this fan's viewpoint, the success of player-promoted content hinges more on the message itself rather than the endorser. This sentiment is shared by *Heung-Min Son*, who says, *"Player promotion can help enhance the fan experience, but should not overshadow team identities."*. Similar to this notion, *Bruno* states that he is not a fan of the player promotion he is interacting with on social media. *"I support the club, not the players. I am not a "PlayerFC" guy. I also don't like that players often don't administrate their own accounts, making the content feel fake and disingenuous."*. While *Højlund*, *Heung-Min Son*, and *Bruno* represent fans that could be skeptical to engage with player-promoted content, there are plentiful of fans that embrace the player-promoted content and view it in a positive light. *Nunez* mentions, *"The superstars being promoted in the Premier League makes a lot of sense to me. They are the most recognizable faces in the league for a reason and it makes sense to promote them to build both the players brand, but also the teams and the league to reach a new audience"*. In concurrence with this perspective, *Mainoo* notes, *"I would say it's smart to promote them for the matches, as I know for many people, matches that are star-studded can attract many more viewers and interest than an average Premier League match lacking superstar profiles."*. *Alexander-Arnold* also has a positive view on this, mentioning that, *"... this can help increase the level of awareness that fans have about players, as well as helping them build personal relationships between them."*. The sentiments mentioned above are shared by the majority of the respondents, reflecting an overall acceptance and appreciation for the promotion of superstar players in the Premier League.

As previously mentioned, player performances play an integral part in influencing how fans view the players, consequently shaping their engagement to content related to them. In relation to what sort of content that has particularly resonated with fans, *Højlund* expresses, *"I would also say the individual awards given out in the Premier League, such as the Goal of the Month, Player of the Month, etc. always have a sponsor linked, and I always take notice of these sponsors, as these awards are posted on countless different social media platforms."*.

This perspective is also shared by *Martinelli*, who states, *"Prominent players like Erling Haaland often become central figures in various sponsorships, such as Budweiser sponsoring the Goal of the Month award and EA Sports sponsoring the Player of the Month award."*. Similarly, *Palmer* mentions, *"I've noticed they often promote players who are performing well and scoring tons of goals, like Watkins, Haaland, and Solanke"*. The participant also brings up that, *"... posting about players who are performing the best typically increases engagement for the fans, including myself."*.

A concern that is raised by numerous respondents is the eventual possibility of "superstar" players leaving the Premier League for another club or league, diminishing the credibility of the player-promoted content involving them. *Nunez* notes that *"... if the player is to leave the club or league, it can hurt the allegiance to the team as you are more exposed to the player"*. *Mainoo* also supports this notion, stating, *"Promoting individual players may reduce loyalty to the Premier League, as fans tend to follow players rather than leagues, as seen with Haaland's move from the Bundesliga to the Premier League."*. *Palmer* also mentions this dilemma, *"I think that heavy promotion of a player who might leave the club the next summer could backfire on the league as a whole."*. The tremendous impact that individual players can have on fan engagement is also elaborated by *Martinelli*, *"I see tons of fans that are drawn to matches primarily because of their favorite players rather than the team as a whole, which shows the crazy level of influence they can have on fan engagement."*. The uncertain nature surrounding the possibility of players departing from their club or league leads to some of the respondents being hesitant in fully supporting player-promoted content.

Nevertheless, based on all of the responses gathered in the interview process, there seems to be an overall consensus among respondents: fans generally prefer player-promoted content over traditional promotional content, *"particularly when the brand alignment is strong and the promotion feels authentic"*, as *Martinelli* mentions. For the majority of the respondents, authenticity and genuineness of promotions are crucial factors influencing their engagement with player-promoted content. Moreover, *Haaland* remarks, *"It can foster a stronger emotional connection to the performances on the pitch. Understanding more about their personal lives makes us feel like we know the players and their personalities. This makes viewers feel closer to the players compared to traditional promotional materials, such as ads."*. This is supported by *Bruno's* statement, *"It connects people to their teams, which then connects them more to the league. I also think that it contributes to people taking more interest to other teams that they do not support, which I think is great."*. Lastly, *Van Dijk* sets forth that the use of player promotion *"... is a "win-win" for both the fans and the Premier League."*.

Fan Engagement and Sponsorship Recall

In this section of the interview guide, the relationship between these two variables are examined to determine the extent of which the level of fan engagement impacts the ability to recall sponsors. The respondents' replies affirms to the notion that if a fan is more engaged with the content, they are more likely to be susceptible to a greater level of sponsorship recall, hence forming more positive brand associations towards the sponsors at hand.

Respondents were asked to share some personal experiences on how the increased exposure and engagement to sponsored brands would increase their sponsorship recall of said brands. *Martinelli*, a passionate Arsenal fan, gives an example of this relationship, *"I believe that sponsorships, such as stadium naming rights and shirt sponsorships, contribute significantly to brand recognition and association with teams. I am an Arsenal fan and since Emirates has been both the stadium and shirt sponsor for over 15 years, the brand is top-of-mind for me when it comes to luxury airlines."*. Similarly, *Mainoo* states, *"I remember very well when United had Chevrolet as the shirt sponsor a few years ago, so I would say Chevrolet was one of the car brands that were easiest for me to recall during these years."*. Naturally, the stadium and shirt sponsors are two of the sponsors within the Premier League with the most exposure, leading to an effective transfer of brand associations and sponsorship recall in this case.

The level of visibility of sponsored brands in the Premier League seems to be a key factor in recognizing brands, as *Van Dijk* mentions, *"Brands like Nike, Adidas and Umbro are more visible to me and easier to recall than brands like Puma and Hummel because of their numerous sponsorships across multiple clubs, rather than with only one club."*. The level of visibility seems to also be an important factor for *Bruno*, who states, *"The more visible the brand is, the better it is. It is probably not always true, but I indirectly perceive it as that."*. This is also the case for *Varane*, who asserts, *"I would definitely say I am more aware of brands that are prominent and continuously showcased in the Premier League."*. *Palmer* explains that not all fans act in the same way, *"The effectiveness of advertising varies, as some fans might focus more on football rather than sponsors, while others pay attention to both."*. Lastly, *Højlund* explains how visibility affects one's ability to recall brands in an apparent manner, *"Visibility wins. Humans are pretty simple species, which means that what we see in everyday life, in this case brands, is what we remember at the top of our mind."*.

The influence of social media has certainly transformed the way individuals engage with content, thus greatly impacting the effectiveness of marketing campaigns, and consequently, individuals ability to recall sponsors. This thought is expressed by *Højlund*, who says, *"In today's polarized society, certainly driven by social media,*

people are forced to have a stance on everything. This means that if a group of people are engaged with your content, this has a much greater effect on marketing campaigns in 2024, compared to if you only look back 10 years ago when social media wasn't as common as it is today.". In relation to this, the alignment of one's values seems to be prevalent in **Martinelli's** thoughts, *"Fans often associate sponsor brands with their favorite teams, automatically leading to positive perceptions of the associated brands. This might be because people might irrationally think that there is no way that my favorite team associates themselves with a "bad" brand.".* **Højlund** also talks about his mindset when it comes to his own values and how he applies it in consuming the Premier League, *"Since I love the Premier League and I want my values to be aligned, it almost forces me to "love" the brands being promoted and subconsciously recall them better because of this mindset.".* The importance of aligning one's values seems to be a recurring sentiment among most respondents, suggesting that highly engaged fans are more likely to recall sponsors associated with the content they engage themselves with.

However, some respondents, such as **Nunez**, are indifferent about their own level of engagement in their ability to recall sponsored brands, *"I don't necessarily perceive or recall brands that are more visible any differently than those that are less visible. I just feel like the more visible ones are more well known brands in general.".* This is also the case for **Mainoo**, who claims, *"I don't make much distinction between the ones I perceive. In the same way, I don't really care much about which brands sponsor the Premier League.".* **Heung-min Son** also resonates with this thought, *"When first consuming the Premier League, my primary focus lies on the match itself and the players' performances, rather than on paying close attention to sponsor brands.",* as well as **Alexander-Arnold**, who states, *"The level of brand visibility has little to no effect on my opinion of brands, as I do not engage with too much Premier League content.".*

Despite these remarks, the majority of respondents could agree with the sentiment that the level of fan engagement has an effect on the ability to recall sponsored brands. Conclusively, this recognition from the respondents underscore the pivotal role of fan engagement in shaping sponsorship recall.

Level of Fandom Intensity

In this section of the interview guide, the moderating role that fandom intensity plays in the relationship between fan engagement and sponsorship recall is examined. By clearly identifying the level of fandom intensity of each participant in the interview process, it simplifies the measurement of its moderating role. The analysis of the moderator depends on both the responses provided earlier in the section above and the participants' answers to the question pertaining to this topic in the interview guide.

Højlund, a fan with a "high" level of fandom intensity, mentions that he is very likely to recall brands that are associated to his favorite team and that *"... neutral sponsored brands for the league in general have a high likelihood of being recalled by myself, as I have a very high interest in the league as a whole."*. **Varane**, a fan that shares the same level of fandom, notes, *"It makes me more aware of brands that are linked to the Premier League and it's easier to connect with these brands since I interact with them often."*. **Martinelli**, an eager Arsenal fan, refers back to his Emirates sponsor example when asked about this topic, *"As an avid Arsenal fan, it is super easy for me to recall Emirates, the stadium and shirt sponsor, as one of the leading luxury airlines. I actually know a few Arsenal fans who aren't too invested in the club that are not familiar with what type of brand Emirates is at all."*.

One can observe that fans categorized as having a "medium" level of fandom intensity display varying responses in relation to whether or not it influences their own relationship between fan engagement and sponsorship recall. **Nunez** claims that his fandom intensity does have an effect on his ability to recall sponsors, but not to the same extent as a fan with "high" levels of fandom intensity, *"I think my fandom make me notice the sponsors more, in the sense that I can see a brand on the street or in a store and think "Oh, they're the shirt sponsor for Bournemouth" or something similar. But I wouldn't say that that I am able to recall brands related to the Premier League in every setting I find myself in."*. **Bruno** shares a similar sentiment to the one mentioned above, when mentioning that his level of fandom, *"... affects my ability to recall sponsored brands only slightly. I don't think I take much notice of the majority of sponsorships, especially to the ones that are not associated with my team."*.

Fans that can be categorized as having a "low" level of fandom intensity display limited sponsorship recall when consuming the Premier League, most likely due to a lack of exposure to the brands in question. **Haaland**, a fan with a "low" level of fandom intensity, says that he relies on long-standing sponsorships in order to be able to recall them, *"I can't recall sponsors for teams I don't follow closely, and I can only recall a sponsor associated with my own team if they have been the team sponsor for many years."*. **Heung-Min Son**, who shares the same fandom level, previously stated that when he first watches the Premier League, he is more focused about the game, rather than everything else that goes on around it, *"When first consuming the Premier League, my primary focus lies on the match itself and the players' performances, rather than on paying close attention to sponsor brands."*. **Alexander-Arnold** shares an interesting view on how the evolution of their own fandom intensity over the years has affected their relationship towards sponsors, *"To give an example, when I was a passionate fan growing up, Liverpool used to be sponsored by Carlsberg, which was an iconic beer brand that*

was top-of-mind for me. Nowadays when I don't follow too much, they are sponsored by Standard Chartered, a brand that I have no clue on what is or what they do.".

Based on the responses collected in the interview process, one can conclude that there seems to be a correlation between the level of fandom intensity and the relationship between fan engagement and sponsorship recall. Fans with a "high" level of fandom intensity seem to demonstrate a better ability to recall sponsors when engaging with Premier League content than fans at a "medium" or "low" level, while fans that have a "medium" level of fandom intensity seem to better recall sponsors than fans with a "low" level of fandom intensity when engaging with Premier League content.
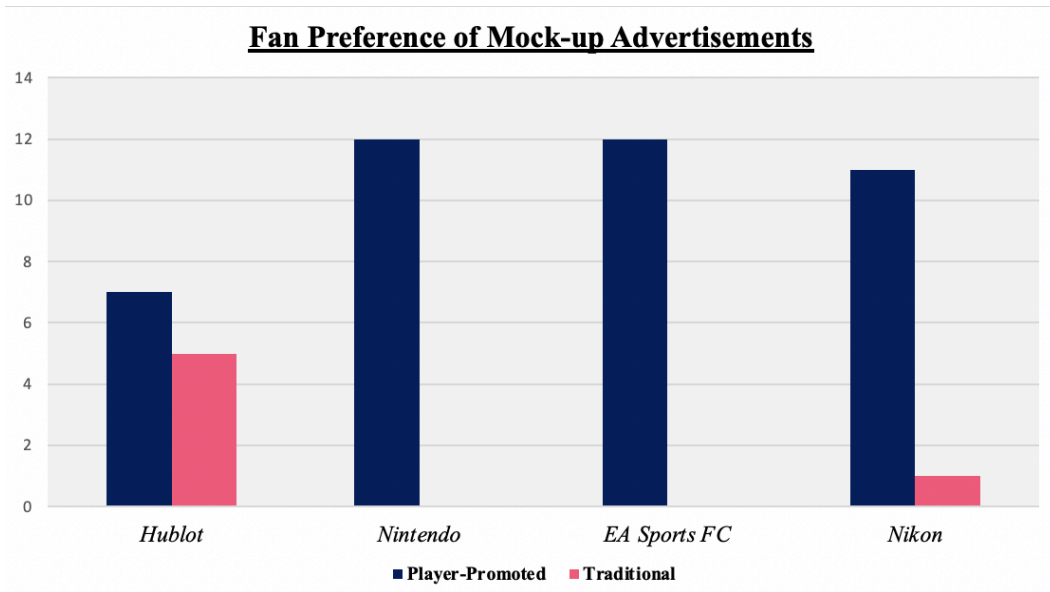
Promotional Material

In the concluding section of the interview guide, mock-up Premier League promotional material was created for the participant to evaluate on whether or not it would increase the likelihood of their own fan engagement and sponsorship recall. Four advertisements were conceptualized, centered around distinguished brands Hublot, Nintendo, EA Sports FC, and Nikon. The objective of the mock-up promotional material was to get a better understanding of whether Premier League fans preferred advertisements centered around "superstar" players or more traditional advertisements that were not centered around "superstar" players.

The Hublot advertisements had a notable divide in opinion among participants, with numerous participants having a preference for the traditional advertisement featuring the watch, in contrast to the player-promoted show sponsored by Hublot. This might be due to the fact that the traditional advertisement clearly showed off the product and made it easier to understand what sort of brand Hublot was. ***Nunez*** mentions this, *"I prefer the Hublot advertisement with the watch, as it is more clear with what they are selling.".* This opinion is also shared by ***Højlund*** who expresses, *"For me I would say the advertisement showing off the clock resonates with me more than the show in the second advertisement. This is because the ad clearly shows what Hublot is and what they stand for as a partner with the Premier League. The other ad was a bit unclear in explaining what Hublot was to me.".* Despite the divide in opinion, the majority of the respondents display a preference for the player-promoted advertisements, illustrated by respondents such as ***Martinelli***, who states, *"While the Hublot ad campaign appeared visually cleaner, I found the the TV show showcased in the other ad to be more intriguing and likely to capture my attention.".* This was also the case for ***Mainoo***, mentioning, *"I don't care about the clock that the Hublot brand is trying to promote and prefer interacting with a cool show.".*

When discussing the Nintendo advertisements, one could see that there was a unanimous preference from nearly all of the respondents for the player-promoted content. **Højlund** states that he resonated with the player-promoted content because, *"This ad also contains 3 of the biggest names in the Premier League, telling the same story as the other ad but in a more visually appealing way, increasing the chance of me linking Nintendo to the Premier League in the future."*. **Mainoo** shares a similar sentiment about this specific advertisement, *"It made me stop and look a little longer at the brand, which led to me easily understanding that Mario Kart and Nintendo were the sponsors for this post."*. **Martinelli** agrees with the thoughts expressed above and adds that *"the animated and humorous approach of the ad resonates with me more"*.

In relation to the EA Sports FC advertisements, there also seemed to be a unified favoritism from all respondents for the player-promoted content, as **Varane** illustrates, *"Højlund holding the card makes more of an impression on me because you get a feeling of what his card in FC24 actually is and it makes me want to play the game and test out his card."*. This sentiment is also shared by **Palmer**, who states, *"I prefer the first picture because it's featuring Højlund, a talented young player, that I can relate more to."*. **Alexander-Arnold** reiterates the previous point respondents gave in relation to player performances when judging this advertisement, *"The image of Højlund captures the interest of fans with POTM (Player of the Month) cards, especially given his current form after scoring a ton of goals."*. Lastly, **Martinelli** is also in favor of the player-promoted content, mentioning that, *"Showing the player off in the ad also made it easier for me that it was a player card that I could use in FC24."*.

Ultimately, concerning the Nikon advertisements, the player-promoted content appeared to be the clear winner in this example as well. Participants such as **Haaland** mentions that he, *"... loves the ad with Martin Ødegaard holding a Nikon camera. It's quirky and amusing."*. **Mainoo** stated that it was, *"... a creative way to use that picture in an advertisement"* and **Martinelli** applauds the player-promoted content as well, *"I prefer the ad on the left as it taps into current football trends (with the famous picture of Ødegaard that has sort of become an internet meme), demonstrating a high level of marketing insight from the Premier League."*. Lastly, **Palmer's** patriotic side emerges when explaining his preference, since, *"... it features a player who is Norwegian, Ødegaard, and since I am Norwegian, I have a soft spot for him and anything that he is involved in."*.

Fan Preference of Mock-up Advertisements

Note: Own illustration based on research findings

Summary of Research Findings

|	
Player Promotion and Fan Engagement	- The majority of fans show a preference for player-promoted content, compared to traditional promotional content, particularly when the promotion is authentically aligned to the brand and emphasizes team values. - Fans take particular notice and actively engage with content revolving around player performances. - Fans also express concerns related to players leaving the Premier League, diminishing the credibility they possess in promotional content, leading to lower overall fan engagement.

Fan Engagement and Sponsorship Recall	- There is a strong correlation between fan engagement levels and sponsorship recall, with highly engaged fans displaying a greater sense of sponsorship recall. - The visibility of sponsor brands greatly influences brand recall among fans. Stadium and shirt sponsorships, possessing a high degree of exposure, appear to have the strongest brand recall among fans. - Current societal trends have emphasized the significance of fans aligning one's values, leading to sponsored brands being viewed in the same manner as the club fans support.
Level of Fandom Intensity	- High level of fandom intensity improves brand recall among fans, mainly due to their in-depth interaction with league content. - Low level of fandom intensity limits brand recall among fans, mainly due to their lack of exposure to league-related content.
Promotional Material	- Fans indicate a clear preference for player-promoted content over traditional promotional content, reinforcing the effectiveness of leveraging player personalities in order to increase fan engagement and improve brand recall amongst Premier League fans.

Conceptual Model

As a result of the research findings presented above, a conceptual model *(as seen below)* was created to visualize the relationships between the variables. In the conceptual model, the independent variable is *"Player Promotion"*, the intermediary variable is *"Fan Engagement"*, and the dependent variable is *"Sponsorship Recall"*. The moderating variable in the relationship between fan engagement and sponsorship recall is *"Fandom Intensity"*. Based on the results, one can conclude that the aforementioned variables play a pivotal role in influencing each other's impact.
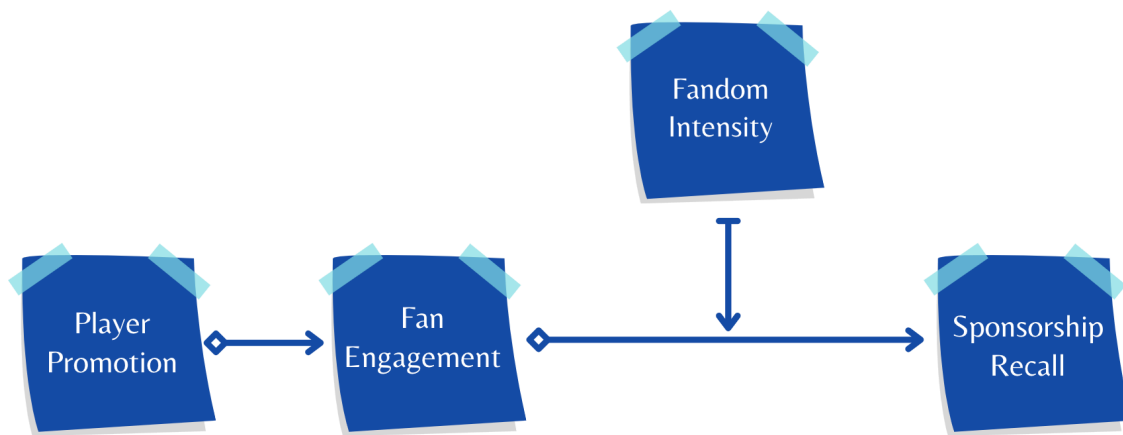
Note: Own illustration based on research findings

DISCUSSION

Practical Implications

Based on the research findings presented above, a number of practical implications can be drawn when considering the subject matter from a managerial standpoint. Fans' consumption of player-promoted content seems to be mostly influenced by two factors, authenticity and the alignment of team values. Fans seem to appreciate content that reflects the team's genuine values and identity, as it comes off less as a commercial endorsement. Therefore, in order to ensure authenticity when creating player-promoted content, marketers should hone in on player promotions aligning closely with the teams overarching values and identity to increase the likelihood of fans resonating with the content. Sponsors can also take advantage of a "golden" branding opportunity by associating themselves with prestigious awards celebrating the success of individual players. In doing so, sponsors can leverage the positive associations of the players' success and extend it to their own brand. Historically, these prestigious awards are won by Premier League players with a considerable amount of social influence, meaning that sponsors have the opportunity to maximize their impact and connect with a broader audience. The research findings also point to the importance of brand visibility in influencing brand recall among fans. Sponsors who want to increase their recall amongst Premier League fans should give priority to placements that offer high visibility, such as stadium and shirt sponsorships. Frequent exposure across several touchpoints seems to significantly bolster fans' ability to recall sponsorships.

Highly engaged fans are also seen to show a better sense of sponsorship recall, when compared to fans with lower levels of fan engagement. Consequently, marketers should tailor promotional strategies based on fans' level of fan engagement. Simpler messaging may prove to be a better strategy to capture the attention of fans with lower levels of fan engagement, while interactive and immersive content may be better suited for fans with high levels of fan engagement. The same strategies can also be applied to fans with varying levels of fandom intensity. In doing so, marketers strengthen the chances of their content being effectively conveyed to Premier League fans. Moreover, fans seem to overwhelmingly show a preference for player-promoted content over traditional promotional content. The player endorsements seem to add a personal and relatable element that fans resonate more with. It seems that fostering emotional connections through personal storytelling appears to effectively contribute to fans resonating with the content, which can lead to positive brand perceptions and potentially a greater sense of brand recall. Understanding what sort of content fans resonate with is certainly a relevant aspect for marketers to grasp a better understanding of in the context being discussed. Furthermore, the findings seem to raise a concern surrounding the diminishing credibility of player-promoted content involving players leaving a certain team for another or the Premier League as a whole. As a result, marketers should consider implementing strategies that mitigate such concerns. This could for example be to focus on long-term partnerships, highlighting team or league values, that transcend the influence that individual players can have on fans' perceptions of brands. In simpler terms, marketers should avoid putting all their efforts into solely promoting content centered around players, as it could backfire in the occurrence of player turnover.

Lastly, the research findings indicate that fans prefer creative and visually appealing content, as it easily captures their attention and increases the likelihood for recall. Hence, marketers should explore various storytelling techniques and content formats in order to grasp a better understanding of what sort of content engages fans and leaves a lasting impression. Based on the research findings and prevailing societal trends, it seems as if leveraging current trends, memes, and cultural references could prove to create a more immersive and memorable experience for the average fan. Conclusively, the research highlights the crucial role of marketers in producing authentic content that aligns with team values to maximize the impact of player-promoted content and sponsorships within the Premier League. Marketers must adeptly navigate varying fan engagement levels and develop compelling narratives that resonate with fans, ensuring both longevity and credibility in the face of player turnover dynamics.

Theoretical Implications

Based on the research findings presented above, a number of theoretical implications can be drawn when considering the subject matter from a theoretical perspective. The research indicates a strong link between the promotion of "superstar" Premier League players and increased fan engagement, subsequently improving sponsorship recall among fans. These findings align with *Walliser (2003)* and *Roy & Cornwell (2004)*, who both demonstrated the positive effect that effective fan engagement strategies, which in this case was player promotion, can have on sponsorship recall. *Wakefield & Bennett (2010)* also support the notion of fan engagement playing a critical role in improving sponsorship recall, which this study supports, specifically within the context of the Premier League. *Biscaia et al. (2014)* also found a link between these two factors, but they did not explore the specific impact of player promotion, providing a more nuanced view of how this variable affects the relationship between fan engagement and sponsorship recall. Both *Phua (2012)* and *Stavros et al. (2014)* discovered that athletes with a strong social media presence improve fan engagement and brand interactions, which is a finding that is supported in the study, specifically within the context of the Premier League. Athletes can be seen as efficacious brand ambassadors, since the advantageous attributes of superstar athletes are transferred to endorsed products, was covered by *Kamins (1990)*. The findings support this phenomenon by showing how superstar players transfer their advantageous attributes to improve sponsorship recall among fans.

The findings related to how higher fandom intensity increases the effects of player promotion on fan engagement and sponsorship recall are consistent with those of *Madrigal (2000)* and *Dalakas & Levin (2005)*, who both found that fan loyalty and intensity have a substantial effect in how fans respond to marketing efforts. This is also the case for *Cornwell et al. (2005)*, who highlighted the role that fan intensity plays in how marketing outcomes unfold, which the research confirms when demonstrating the moderating effect that fandom intensity has on the relationships mentioned above. The research also mentions that fans prefer player-promoted content over traditional promotional content, especially when the brand alignment is strong and the promotion feels authentic. This is in line with *Kamins' (1990)* work, which states that *"endorsers are more effective when there is a fit between the endorser and the endorsed product"*. This finding also aligns with the work of *Biscaia et al. (2014)*, who argue that authentic endorsements create stronger emotional connections between brands and fans, thereby improving fan engagement and sponsorship recall. The research findings showed that highly engaged fans are more likely to recall sponsors, particularly if the sponsors had a high visibility, such as stadium or shirt sponsorships. Furthermore, the findings also support the research of *Maxwell & Lough (2009)*, who note that team identification is a significant predictor of sponsor recall. Lastly, *Biscaia et al. (2014),* who found that brands displayed on team shirts or having naming rights for stadiums are recalled more frequently, also support

these findings. *Hull & Abeza (2021)* emphasize the value of visually appealing and engaging content in the digital age in retaining fans' engagement and loyalty, which is supported in the research when observing fans' preferences to the mock-up advertisements. *Petersen-Wagner (2017)* mentions that fan individualization is fueled by commercialization, where fans are increasingly creating their own identities through the utilization of commercial elements that best suit their own proclivity. *Hoegele et al. (2014)* additionally point out that fan identification has shifted since the birth of global superstars, resulting in some fans perceiving the individual superstars as more important to their own identity than the actual team. The research findings support this by showing that the promotion of "superstar" Premier League players significantly impacts fan engagement and sponsorship recall.

The research conducted aligns with current literature, while also extending the current understanding within sports marketing literature. The insights gained from the nuanced dynamics of player-promoted content, fan engagement, and sponsorship recall extend the current knowledge in the field.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In concurrence with any type of research conducted, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the study that consequently could have had an impact on the findings. Recognizing these limitations makes it easier to identify areas of the research that need further investigating.

Firstly, although the research relies on qualitative methods, providing rich and detailed insights to the study, it may not be generalizable to the broader population. Relying on self-reported data from in-depth interviews may invoke biases among the respondents such as social desirability bias or recall bias. Participants may provide responses they think the researcher expects to hear, rather than expressing their genuine thoughts. Although the study's sample size of 12 participants reached the data saturation needed to report findings for the study, collecting a larger sample of Premier League fans could offer more extensive insights and help further the generalizability of the findings. Gathering a larger sample size could for example be achieved by combining both quantitative and qualitative methods. Furthermore, despite the fact that the specific focus towards the Premier League gave valuable insights, the scope of the study may limit its applicability to other leagues and sports. Different leagues and sports that are culturally different to the Premier League may have other factors influencing the variables at hand.

As mentioned earlier, the temporal aspect of studying fan behavior may also pose as a challenge when researching this topic. The sentiments collected from the respondents were captured from a specific point in time, meaning that factors such as team performances, player transfers, or changes in social media trends could skewer the results if collected at a different point in time. This was also reflected by some of the respondents' answers, when mentioning how their level of fandom intensity has fluctuated through the years. Moreover, given the rapid changes seen in recent years in social media and technology, the findings of this study may become irrelevant in the future, as the strategies and platforms that are currently most effective may not remain so over time. The lack of standardized measures in the study for assessing fan engagement and sponsorship recall could also be addressed to strengthen the reliability of the findings. These measures could help improve the overall accuracy of the study. Lastly, the interpretation of qualitative data poses the risk of the researcher drawing subjective conclusions that might not accurately reflect the overall sentiments expressed by the respondents. Therefore, involving multiple researchers or research methods could help mitigate this issue.

Building on the research findings and addressing its limitations opens up several avenues for future research of the topic at hand. For example, future studies could incorporate a mixed-methods approach, utilizing both a quantitative and qualitative approach, where behavioral data such as social media analytics or purchase behavior is included to complement the data from the in-depth interviews. By using larger and more diverse sample sizes, it could help reduce potential biases that may arise in the self-reported data. Additionally, future research could take a closer look at how developing technologies, such as augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and artificial intelligence (AI), can improve both fan engagement and sponsorship recall. Research of these technologies could investigate how they can help create immersive experiences for fans, hence improving the aforementioned variables. Moreover, future studies could employ a more long-term approach, perhaps through a longitudinal study, by delving deeper into the long-term effects of sponsorship on brand loyalty and overall consumer behavior. Gaining a better understanding of how sustained sponsorships influence sports fans' behavior is certainly an intriguing avenue to go deeper into.

As mentioned earlier, conducting a cross-cultural study across various football leagues and cultures could yield valuable insights that were not attained through this study. This could potentially help increase the applicability of the topic and streamline the development of marketing strategies towards diverse fan demographics. Lastly, understanding how negative player behavior or scandals can contribute to diminishing the credibility of player-centric marketing campaigns is certainly an intriguing aspect that has not been looked greatly into.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this paper was to explore the impact that promoting "superstar" Premier League players has on Premier League fan engagement, and subsequently, sponsorship recall. Additionally, the moderating effect of the level of fandom intensity was included to understand how it affects the aforementioned variables. This research is particularly relevant in todays digital age, where new avenues for both consumers and marketers have emerged, paving the way for innovative and exciting marketing opportunities.

Research question one of the study was: *"How does the promotion of "superstar" players affect fan engagement, and subsequently, sponsorship recall?".* The research findings indicate that promoting "superstar" Premier League players considerably increase fan engagement. The majority of fans show a preference for player-promoted content, compared to traditional promotional content, particularly when the promotion is authentically aligned to the brand and emphasizes team values. Fans take particular notice and actively engage with content revolving around player performances. Qualitative data gathered from the in-depth interviews reveal that fans frequently remember and positively associate with brands prominently displayed alongside high-profile players. Highly engaged fans seems to display a greater sense of sponsorship recall than fans with lower levels of engagement. The visibility of sponsor brands seem to greatly influence sponsorship recall among fans. Stadium and shirt sponsorships, possessing a high degree of exposure, appear to have the strongest brand recall among fans. These findings underline the effectiveness of leveraging player personalities in order to increase fan engagement and sponsorship recall in the Premier League.

Research question two of the study was: *"How does the level of fandom intensity moderate the relationship between fan engagement and sponsorship recall?".* The research findings indicate that the level of fandom intensity plays an essential role in the relationship between fan engagement and sponsorship recall. Fans with a high level of fandom intensity are more likely to engage with content related to their favorite players and teams, which consequently leads to a better sense of sponsorship recall. Fans with a lower level of fandom intensity showed less engagement, and consequently a worse sense of sponsorship recall. The research findings highlight the need for marketers to tailor their marketing strategies to different fandom intensity levels in order to achieve optimal results within the Premier League.

The paradigm shift in the sports marketing landscape in recent years has led to sports organizations needing to reevaluate how they communicate to their fan base. Amidst an era of unprecedented digital transformation, leveraging the influence of player personalities seems to be a prerequisite in improving fan engagement and sponsorship recall among fans. By aligning one's marketing efforts with the profound social impact of these

players, sports organizations can increase the likelihood of associated brands resonating deeply with fans who consume the content. If done correctly, the synergetic integration of player-promotion and innovative marketing techniques can help transform fan engagement to a new level, where commercial success can be achieved while preserving core values deeply cherished by fans, giving sports organizations a competitive advantage in a rapidly-evolving digital landscape.

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APPENDIX

Interview Guide

INTERVIEW GUIDE
OPENING
1. Tell me about how your interest in the Premier League started. What is your story?
2. Do you have any sporting heroes you look up to in the Premier League? If so, have these players ever been solely responsible for your fan engagement with a certain team?
3. How frequently do you engage with Premier League-related content, such as matches, news updates, and social media conversations?
4. What are your preferred platforms to consume Premier League content on?
5. In relation to sponsor brands associated with Premier League teams or players, how would you rate your own level of awareness or recall?
PLAYER PROMOTION AND FAN ENGAGEMENT
1. What are your thoughts on the way "superstar" players in the Premier League are being promoted on social media?
2. Have you noticed any particular strategies put to use, and if so, are there any examples you can remember that particularly resonated with you?
3. How do you feel the promotion of "superstar" players influence your overall level of engagement with the content on social media?
4. Do you believe that player promotion, compared to traditional promotional material, increases the likelihood to connect and build loyalty towards the Premier League?
5. How can the increase of the use of player promotion in social media contribute to the overall fan experience of the Premier League?
FAN ENGAGEMENT AND SPONSORSHIP RECALL
1. Are you able to recall any instances where the exposure to Premier League content has influenced your awareness of sponsor brands?
2. Do you think there is a correlation between the level of fan engagement on social media and the effectiveness of marketing campaigns within the Premier League?
3. How do you perceive brands that are actively involved and visible within the Premier League compared to those that are less visible?
FANDOM INTENSITY
1. From a scale of 1-10, how would you describe your fandom intensity to your own Premier League team and towards the Premier League in general?
2. How would you say your own fandom intensity affects your perception and ability to recall sponsored brands related to the Premier League?
PROMOTIONAL MATERIAL
1. Looking at these two mock-up Premier League advertisements, which one would you say would make a bigger impression on you and increase the likelihood of fan engagement and sponsorship recall? (4x)
CLOSING
1. Do you have any additional comments you would like to make regarding your experiences as a Premier League fan or your perceptions of player promotion and sponsorship in football?
2. Who is your favorite player in the Premier League? Would you approve for this name becoming your alias when discussing the results of the research at hand?

Example Interview Transcript

(Højlund - High level of fandom intensity)

Before we begin, please note that this interview is conducted as part of research conducted for my master thesis. All of the interviews are audio recorded, but will be deleted upon the completion of the master thesis. The aim of the research is to explore the impact of player promotion on fan engagement and sponsorship recall among Premier League fans. Your responses will remain anonymous throughout the entire process, through the use of an alias of your own choosing. Lastly, you have the right to withdraw from the entire interview process if you choose to do so. Do you agree to these conditions? If so, we can begin the interview…

Yes sounds good. Let's start.

OPENING

1. Tell me about how your interest in the Premier League started. What is your story?

It all started with my family being very interested in the Premier League. I almost felt like they pushed the sport onto me, and forced me to follow it intensely from a young age. My father and brother were Liverpool fans, but I wanted to go against the stream and be different by supporting Manchester United, who were better than Liverpool at the time. This of course led to me feeling superior to my father and brother when it came to who was the better fan. My earliest memory must be from the 2006/2007 season, especially Cristiano Ronaldo, which means that I have been a fan of the team for 17/18 years.

2. Do you have any sporting heroes you look up to in the Premier League? If so, have these players ever been solely responsible for your fan engagement with a certain team?

Yeah, of course I have some sporting heroes in the Premier League. My first hero was the United legend keeper Van der Sar, which actually inspired me to play as a goalkeeper in my early days as a football player. Later on, the club legend and striker Rooney was my sporting hero, due to his fight and passion for the club on the field. This greatly resonated with me and for some years while he was at the club, I would tune into every match to see the incredible workrate he would put in for the team.

3. How frequently do you engage with Premier League-related content, such as matches, news updates, and social media conversations?

I am an avid social media user and close to everything I follow on social media is Premier League-related. If I were to guess, I interact with content every hour of the day. So I would definitely say I am in the loop when it comes to what is happening in the footballing world.

4. What are your preferred platforms to consume Premier League content on?

It would have to mainly be Youtube and X that I follow most. On Youtube, it is usually focused on fan channels dedicated to my favorite club, while on X it is more general content about the Premier League.

5. In relation to sponsor brands associated with Premier League teams or players, how would you rate your own level of awareness or recall?

I would definitely say I have a very high awareness of the international brands in the Premier League, since I consume so much content through both social media and watching matches. I don't think I could recall every brand without any help, but my general awareness is pretty high.

PLAYER PROMOTION AND FAN ENGAGEMENT

1. What are your thoughts on the way "superstar" players in the Premier League are being promoted on social media?

It depends greatly on what they are promoting. The most important for me is that club values emerge before individual player values. So I would rather prefer an advertisement with three players from the same club, showing team togetherness, rather than one superstar player promoting a brand by themself. So basically, the authenticity of the message greatly depends on how I look at player promotion on social media.

What motivates you to react in the manner that you do?

I grew up in a time when football club values were much more prominent. When I started watching the sport, there weren't as many superstars, and the superstar value wasn't as significant as it is today. The rise of social media has completely changed the promotion of players, making it much easier to create superstars through various platforms.

2. Have you noticed any particular strategies put to use, and if so, are there any examples you can remember that particularly resonated with you?

I would say the overall rebranding the Premier League has done in recent years has particularly resonated with me. Campaigns such as "Say No To Racism" and "Black Lives Matter" have seemed very genuine and real to me, as the players used in these advertisements actually seem to care about the cause. I would also say the individual awards given out in the Premier League, such as the Goal of the Month, Player of the Month, etc. always have a sponsor linked, and I always take notice of these sponsors, as these awards are posted on countless different social media platforms. The Beats Collaboration with Lebron James and Erling Haaland that recently aired particularly resonated with me, since those two players are some of my favorites in their respective sport.

3. How do you feel the promotion of "superstar" players influence your overall level of engagement with the content on social media?

As mentioned earlier, I am not that interested in the individual player promotion of the superstars, as I connect with the team spirit of the collective group rather than the individual superstars. But I greatly understand why superstars appeal to fans' engagement for other people, as they are people with great influence in the social sphere. I could also mention that I have a nationalistic view on the players in the Premier League, as I am much more engaged with content that contains any Norwegian players, as I myself am Norwegian, than players from other countries.

4. Do you believe that player promotion, compared to traditional promotional material, increases the likelihood to connect and build loyalty towards the Premier League?

In theory, I would say yes. But in practicality, I would say no. This is because the actions of individual superstars are unreliable and they could ruin their public image through controversy or leave the league for another one, which ruins their credibility in the Premier League. But if we look at it short-term, it is a positive strategy as it increases the likelihood of fan engagement here and now, since the likelihood of fans interacting with content increases by using the superstar names.

What intrinsic motivations/beliefs stand behind this statement?

The history of fame and money has shown how they can corrupt many people. Humans are unreliable and can ruin their public image in an instant, especially in today's world where cancel culture is very relevant. The people surrounding these superstars can easily corrupt them, making the players unreliable figures to solely focus promotion on.

5. How can the increase of the use of player promotion in social media contribute to the overall fan experience of the Premier League?

Firstly, it brings the fans closer to the sports personalities. When you find more out about the players as a person, the more emotionally attached as a fan you are. But I would recommend players that have a high likelihood of staying in the league for years, therefore building loyalty and a bond between the superstars and the fans.

FAN ENGAGEMENT AND SPONSORSHIP RECALL

1. Are you able to recall any instances where the exposure to Premier League content has influenced your awareness of sponsor brands?

Every time I watch a match, the official clock of the Premier League is Hublot, so I have great awareness of this watch brand. Since I consume a lot of matches, this brand is very visible in my life. As mentioned earlier, the individual awards, sponsored by brands such as Budweiser, EA Sports, etc. greatly resonate with me, as these posts are widely spread on social media. In relation to EA Sports, they also release interactive content related to the superstars, which results in me interacting more and more with the brand.

2. Do you think there is a correlation between the level of fan engagement on social media and the effectiveness of marketing campaigns within the Premier League?

I would say there is a correlation between these factors because there seems to be more and more fans that tend to be more connected with brands if they resonate with it. In today's polarized society, certainly driven by social media, people are forced to have a stance on everything. This means that if a group of people are engaged with your content, this has a much greater effect on marketing campaigns in 2024, compared to if you only look back 10 years ago when social media wasn't as prevalent as it is today.

Can you give an example that backs up this point?

The Rainbow Laces campaign in the Premier League over the past couple of years is an example that highlights the polarization within society, especially in football. This campaign, which supported LGBT groups, required all captains to wear a rainbow armband. Some captains refused, and the divide on social media demonstrated this polarization. A similar divide was evident with the Black Lives Matter campaign, sparking significant debate about whether it should be incorporated into the Premier League or not.

3. How do you perceive brands that are actively involved and visible within the Premier League compared to those that are less visible?

Visibility wins. Humans are pretty simple species, which means that what we see in everyday life, in this case brands, is what we remember at the top of our mind. As long as the visibility of the brands showcased in the Premier League continues to have that level of visibility, it will definitely lead to me having a greater personal relationship with these brands, leading me to be more positively inclined to like these brands. Since I love the Premier League and I want my values to be aligned, it almost forces me to "love" the brands being promoted and subconsciously, I recall them better because of this mindset.

FANDOM INTENSITY

1. From a scale of 1-10, how would you describe your fandom intensity to your own Premier League team and towards the Premier League in general?

If I were to rate it on a scale of 1-10, I would definitely say it is a strong 10. This of course fluctuates throughout the years, greatly depending on how well connected I am feeling towards my favorite club. But for the Premier League in general, I would say my interest would never fluctuate, and that I would always be very connected to the league.

2. How would you say your own fandom intensity affects your perception and ability to recall sponsored brands related to the Premier League?

Logically, I would say that I am most perceptible to sponsor brands related to my favorite team, since my fandom intensity is as high as it is. I would also say that neutral sponsored brands for the league in general have a high likelihood of being recalled by myself, as I have a very high interest in the league as a whole.

PROMOTIONAL MATERIAL

1. Looking at these two mock-up Premier League advertisements, which one would you say would make a bigger impression on you and increase the likelihood of fan engagement and sponsorship recall? (4x)

Hublot: For me I would say the advertisement showing off the clock resonates with me more than the show in the second advertisement. This is because the ad clearly shows what Hublot is and what they stand for as a partner with the Premier League. The other ad was a bit unclear in explaining what Hublot was to me.

Nintendo: I would say the player focused advertisement resonates with me at a higher level than the other ad. This is because I associate Nintendo with fun and games, which this ad clearly supports. This ad also contains 3 of the biggest names in the Premier League, telling the same story as the other ad but in a more visually appealing way, increasing the chance of me linking Nintendo to the Premier League in the future.

EA Sports FC: I would say the player focused advertisement resonates with me more as it shows me an opportunity to experience interactive content related to the Premier League and EA Sports FC. It is also intriguing for me to test out the card mentioned in the ad, and it makes me want to recreate the magical moments that the player had in real life, but in the game.

Nikon: Although I can see the appeal of using the superstar player in this ad, I would actually prefer the ad with all the fans, as I am very weak for supporters showing unity and having shared experiences with one another. But I would say it is very close, as it might be a bit unclear in the fan ad that Nikon is a camera brand, which the player promoted one clearly shows.

Which of these ads resonated with you the most on an emotional level, and why?

The ad that resonated with me the most was the Nikon ad featuring the picture of the fans. It encapsulates what football is all about: joy, celebration, happiness, and togetherness. It captures the feeling we all seek in everyday life.

CLOSING

1. Do you have any additional comments you would like to make regarding your experiences as a Premier League fan or your perceptions of player promotion and sponsorship in football?

I think it is necessary to have a balance when it comes to bringing in new fans, while at the same time, maintaining the existing fans. I believe player promotion has a great effect on fan engagement and sponsorship recall, and that the league as a whole should focus more on using these strategies in the future. Building as many superstars as possible is super important, as you can see leagues such as LaLiga, lacking superstars after the departures of Ronaldo and Messi, are struggling at times with fan engagement and sponsorship recall. However, I wouldn't rely too much on this strategy, and when using it, it is necessary that there is a proper breadth of superstars that are being promoted in the league.

2. Who is your favorite player in the Premier League? Would you approve for this name becoming your alias when discussing the results of the research at hand?

My favorite player in the Premier League at the moment is the Manchester United striker Rasmus Højlund. You can certainly use this as my alias for your thesis.

--------------------------- END OF INTERVIEW ---------------------------

Promotional Material

HUBLOT MOCK-UP ADS

NINTENDO MOCK-UP ADS

EA SPORTS FC 24 MOCK-UP ADS

NIKON MOCK-UP ADS