

This thesis is submitted to the University of Salford Business School in conformity with the requirements for the degree of a Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration

No part of this work has been submitted in support of an application for any other qualification of this, or any other institution of learning. I declare that this is an original piece of work and that all data has been collected and results analysed as stated within. This research has been conducted in an ethical manner in accordance with the University of Salford's Ethical Framework.

Signed: Date: 30/09/2024

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"Victoria Concordia Crescit"

God bless,

Maxwell Kimamo

The Glossary

EPL – English Premier League

FC – Football Club

Arsenal FC- A top tier football club in the EPL

Football Fan – An individual who supports a football club

SMBCs – Social Media Brand Communities

FGC – Firm-generated Content

UGC – User-generated Content

Arsenal's official YouTube channel – an official SMBC established by Arsenal that produces FGC on YouTube

AFTV – [Formerly] Arsenal Fan TV, a user SMBC established by Arsenal fans that produces UGC on YouTube

IJ 1 – Immersion Journal 1 [for Arsenal's official YouTube Channel]

IJ 2 – Immersion Journal 2 [for AFTV's YouTube Channel]

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Abstract

The rise of social media users and both football official and Fan TV YouTube channels has been fruitful for football clubs and their fans. In this context, the fourth quarter of 2023 had approximately 5.3 billion internet users globally, which was 65.7 percent of the global population. Of this total, 4.95 billion or 61.4 percent of the world's population were social media users (Petrosyan, 2023). Additionally, Degenhard (2023) notes that the global number of internet users was forecasted to increase by 1.2 billion between 2024 and 2028. In the online football fan sphere, the official YouTube channels of the top five football clubs in the EPL season 2023/24 have 26.381 million subscribers, whereas Fan TV YouTube channels established by their fans have 3.293 million subscribers. In addition, Arsenal FC's official YouTube channel has 4.17 million subscribers and AFTV, a Fan TV YouTube channel established by Arsenal FC's fans has 1.67 million subscribers (YouTube, 2024). Still, football Fan TV YouTube channels pose both an opportunity and a threat to football clubs' brand equity. This is because they are beyond football clubs' control, and provide football fans with a platform to share brand opinions without any football club restrictions. In this light, Aaker (1991) proposes that "Brand equity is a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol, that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm's customers" (p. 27). Moreover, Keller (1993) stresses the importance of brand knowledge and proposes that "customer-based brand equity occurs when the consumer is familiar with the brand and holds some favourable, strong, and unique brand associations in memory" (p. 2). This study uses brand equity as a theoretical lens to investigate the existence of its dimensions (brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand associations) within the digital data traces of the following respective football official and Fan TV YouTube communities: 1) Arsenal FC's official YouTube channel; and 2) AFTV. Thus, to implement this investigation, this study employs netnography which is a form of qualitative research that seeks to understand the cultural experiences that encompass and are reflected within the traces, practices, networks and systems of social media (Kozinets, 2020). Additionally, within netnography, this study uses the following two immersion journals to unobtrusively observe Arsenal's official YouTube community and AFTV's You Tube community during the EPL season 2022/23: IJ 1—An immersion dedicated to Arsenal FC's official YouTube channel;

and IJ 2—An immersion journal dedicated to AFTV. Moreover, various autonetnographic introspections are included in the netnographic account of this study. Auto-netnography is a method to netnography that showcases the role of the netnographer's own experiences and/or his/her own online experiences. It merges the participant-observational method of netnography with the reflexive, autobiographical approach of autoethnography (Kozinets & Kedzior, 2009).

To this end, this study is significant because: 1) it is a new and developing subject in the discipline of sports marketing given the rapid growth of football official and Fan TV YouTube channels; 2) it will help netnographers and other digital marketing researchers understand how brand equity is showcased within SMBCs; and 3) it will enable marketers to understand how to nurture, maintain, and protect a football clubs' brand equity on official and Fan TV YouTube channels given the lucrative brand value some top EPL football clubs have—Arsenal FC, \$851 million (Statista, 2024), and the unique historical heritage that these football club brands have—Arsenal FC, founded in 1886 (Arsenal, 2023).

The theoretical implications of this study indicate that: 1) ritual texts, conscious and subconscious brand loyalty texts, brand influencer texts, bonding texts, affective analytical texts, and emotional texts, contribute to brand emotions as a new brand equity dimension; 2) punditry texts, brand influencer texts, experiential texts, community jargon, symbolic texts and affective analytical texts, contribute to brand functionality as a new brand equity dimension; 3) punditry texts contribute to both brand awareness and perceived quality as dimensions of brand equity; 4) brand influencer texts contribute to brand loyalty, brand awareness, and perceived quality as dimensions of brand equity; and 5) experiential texts contribute to both perceived quality and brand awareness as dimensions of brand equity. Lastly, this study recommends that in good practice football club brand managers can maintain and nurture a club's brand equity by incorporating the following aspects in their digital marketing programs: 1) YouTube buyer personas; 2) Brand engagement and cultural lingua; 3) Match highlights and fan post-match interviews from an official YouTube channel and a Fan TV YouTube channel; and 4) Adapting the Ubuntu philosophy in collaboration and content co-creation between the club and Fan TV YouTube channels.

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Focal research problem

The increasing use of social media, including its use in digital marketing, has been instrumental in the rapid growth of football official and Fan TV YouTube channels. The official YouTube channels of the top five football clubs in the EPL season 2023/24 have 26.381 million subscribers whereas Fan TV YouTube channels established by their fans have 3.293 million subscribers (YouTube, 2024). These football clubs use their official Fan TV YouTube channels to promote their brands. However, Fan TV YouTube channels are autonomous and free to share their brand perceptions on football clubs without club restrictions. This could pose a risk to football club brands and should be a key concern given the potential damage they could cause to their lucrative brand values. For example, the combined brand value of football clubs in the EPL is worth \$9.8 billion (Statista, 2023).

The above suggests that social media offers an opportunity for football clubs to engage in digital marketing, but at the same time ushers in risks to their brand equity. Brand equity is important as it provides organisations with: 1) brand loyalty; 2) brand extensions; 3) trade leverage; 4) price margins; 5) competitive advantage; and 6) efficient/effective marketing programs (D. A. Aaker, 1991). Still, brand equity of football clubs is neglected in football studies. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap. In doing so, it will contribute to the body of knowledge required to inform digital marketing strategy in terms of how to nurture, maintain and protect the brand equity of football clubs. Furthermore, by using brand equity as a theoretical lens, this study provides an explanatory account of how this concept exists within a particular social media context.

As a netnography, this study sets out to explore the digital data traces within football official and Fan TV YouTube channels that lead to the brand equity of football clubs. Netnography is a form of qualitative research that seeks to understand the cultural experiences that encompass and are reflected within the traces, practices, networks and systems of social media (R. Kozinets, 2020). In this regard, the cases for this study are: 1) Arsenal FC¹, which has a brand value of \$851 million (Statista, 2024) and; 2) AFTV (formerly Arsenal Fan TV), a YouTube Fan TV channel established by long

¹ For simplification purposes Arsenal FC will be referred to as Arsenal, for the rest of this study.

time Arsenal fans, which has the highest subscription (1.67 million) compared to other football Fan TV YouTube channels.

1.2. Background of brand equity

This section briefly discusses Aaker (1991) brand equity concept and its dimensions. Aaker (1991) explains that brand equity is an ensemble of brand assets and liabilities connected to a brand, its name and symbol, that add to or subtract from the value offered by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm's customers. For him, the assets and liabilities on which brand equity is grounded will vary from context to context. However they can be practically grouped into four categories:

- 1. Brand loyalty—According to Aaker (1991), brand loyalty is the degree of attachment that a customer has to a brand. It echoes how likely a customer will be to use a different brand especially when that brand makes a change, either in price or in product features. In addition, when brand loyalty grows, the vulnerability of the customer base to competitive action is reduced.
- 2. Brand awareness—Aaker (1991) notes that brand awareness is the capacity of a potential customer to recognise or recall that a brand is a member of a particular product category. It comprises of a continuum ranging from an uncertain feeling that the brand is recognised, to a belief that it is the only one in the product class.
- **3. Perceived quality**—Aaker (1991) cites Zeithaml (1988) and notes that perceived quality can be defined as the customer's perception of the overall quality or superiority of a product or service with respect to its intended purpose, relative to the alternative.
- **4. Brand associations**—For Aaker (1991), a brand association is anything linked in memory to a brand. He adds that the association not only exists but has a degree of strength. It will be stronger when it is built on many experiences or exposures to communications, rather than few. Moreover, it will be sturdier when it is upheld by a network of other links.

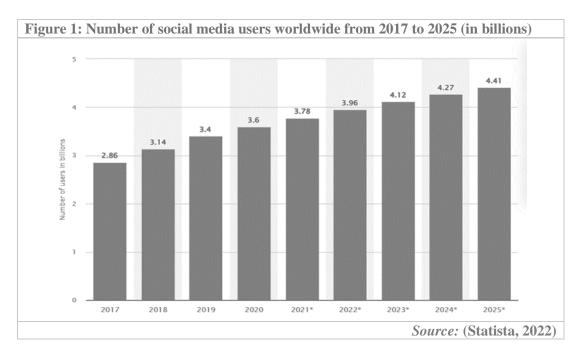
Aaker (1991) concept of brand equity will be discussed extensively in the third chapter of this thesis.

1.3. Rationale

The rationale of this study is constituted by five major areas, namely: 1) social media and sports; 2) official and Fan TV YouTube channels; 3) gaps in football research; 4) the EPL and Arsenal; and 5) YouTube and sports marketing.

1.3.1. Social media and sports

Social media is a group of software-based digital technologies such as applications and other online technologies that enable users to engage in a variety of different content creation, circulation, annotation, and association activities. It allows users to come together online and exchange, discuss, communicate and participate in any form of social interaction. This interaction encompasses text, audio, images, video and other media, individually or in any combination. It can involve the generation of new content, the recommendation of and sharing of existing content, reviewing and rating products, services and brands, discussing the hot topics of the day, pursuing hobbies, interests and passions, and sharing experience and expertise (Kozinets, 2020; Appel et al., 2020; Aichner, 2019; Rivers & Ross, 2021). Globally, the number of social media users is projected to reach 4.41 billion by 2025 (see figure 1) (Statista, 2022).



Social media plays an important role in marketing (Nisar et al. 2018) and provides an opportunity for companies to gain competitive advantage in their brand engagement (Gómez et al., 2019) It has enabled sports marketers to communicate their brand image

and engage with fans (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2019) drive between 5-20% of total value generated for sponsors in sports (Hurst & Plastiras, 2017) and undertake strategic marketing for football clubs in a constantly changing sporting and digital landscape (McCarthy et al., 2022). Holts (2016) notes that social media's facilitation of crowd cultures who produce their own content (user-generated content-UGC) provides scope for further research in this area.

From the foregoing, it is clear that social media's ability to contribute to digital marketing in sports is contested. While one body of research indicates that social media provides sports organisations with an opportunity to promote their brands, other research points out that social media's enabling of UGC offers room for continued research. Therefore, understanding how brand equity exists within official and UGC social media contexts is fundamental to this study.

1.3.2. Football official and Fan TV YouTube channels

Football clubs are brands with large volumes of highly engaged fans. Social media provides an increasing and potentially lucrative opportunity to engage with fans locally and globally (Fenton & Helleu, 2018). This has led to the growth of official and Fan TV YouTube channels, which are akin to brand communities as the football fans in these channels share a common brand interest (football clubs) and bond with others that have similar sentiments. Aaker, a founding father of brand equity refers to brand communities as "groups of people that bond over something that they are interested in and bond with others who have likeminded inclinations. They bond with a brand and are really enabled by social media" (Meyerson, 2022, para. 32). For Aaker, brands which understand the importance of brand communities will develop programs that are related to what these communities are interested in (Westergaard, 2020). Similarly, Smith (2016) notes that a brand's online presence, specifically, their social presence, can be an asset that generates brand equity (brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty) thus adding value to the consumer and the brand. Hence, Football clubs use official social media channels to reach fans, and to establish and foster interactive, long-term relationships with them (Dvergedal, 2021). One specific and particularly important aspect to these channels is the provision of fans with Firm Generated Content (FGC), which Colicev et al. (2019) term as content initiated, created and managed by a brand's marketing team. According to Menon and Philip (2018), football clubs offer fans content which includes updates, information and details about games, transfers and injuries through official social media channels (Facebook, X, Instagram, Tik Tok and YouTube). This engagement stimulates a direct connection between football fans and clubs thus enabling a two-way communication via comments. Additionally, official football club social media channels have a huge social media following. Table 1 highlights the total social media following of the ten most followed football clubs in the world as of the year 2024.

Table 1: Europe's top ten football clubs and their social media followers				
Position	Club	Million followers (Instagram, Facebook, X, TikTok and YouTube)		
1	Real Madrid	405.50		
2	Barcelona	346.70		
3	Manchester United	221.20		
4	PSG	172.02		
5	Manchester City	157.41		
6	Liverpool	148.50		
7	Chelsea	144.76		
8	Juventus	154.22		
9	Bayern Munich	131.54		
10	Arsenal	106.64		

In contrast to official YouTube Channels of football clubs, Fan TV YouTube channels provide an opportunity for football fans to create and upload their content (Woods & Ludvigsen, 2022). Such user-generated content (UGC) allows regular users to contribute data, information, or media in a useful or entertaining way (Krumm et al., 2008). Fan TV YouTube channels have acquired a relatively high number of followers. In this sense, table 2 demonstrates the growing nature of Fan TV YouTube channels.

One outstanding issue arising from the data in table 2 is that AFTV, a YouTube channel that shares UGC about Arsenal has a substantially higher following (1.67 million) than its fellow Fan TV YouTube channels. Rivers and Ross (2021) opine that AFTV's success lies within a vast social media landscape that enables and entices cynicism, negativity and conflict. They add that fans of Arsenal's rivals watch the YouTube channels and expect to be entertained by performances of regular match-day

interviewees such as Troopz, a long-time Arsenal fan. O'Brien (2020) adds that the rise of AFTV is attributed to sharing of viral videos of furious supporters, providing fans with a laugh more than anything else.

Table 2: Number of subscribers of Fan TV YouTube channels established by fans of the ten most followed football clubs on official social media channels			
Position	Club	Fan TV YouTube Channel	No. of Subscribers
1	Real Madrid	El Merengue Culé	17,800
2	Barcelona	Talk FCB	598,000
3	Manchester United	Stretford Paddock	757,000
4	PSG	PSG Fan TV	62,500
5	Manchester City	City Xtra	87,200
6	Liverpool	The Redmen TV	544,000
7	Chelsea	Chelsea Fan TV	218,000
8	Juventus	GJustjuve	31,800
9	Bayern Munich	Bayern Now	12,000
10	Arsenal	AFTV	1.67 million
Source: (YouTube, 2024)			

Since Fan TV YouTube channels are independent of football clubs' control, they are free to share their brand perceptions (feelings, beliefs, opinions, experiences and thoughts) without club restrictions (Ryan et al., 2017). This could pose a risk to the brand equity of football clubs. Aaker (2013) defines brand equity as the value of having a recognised brand based on the idea that firmly established and reputable brands are more successful. The vulnerability of a football club's brand equity to Fan TV YouTube channels is well illustrated in the case of Arsenal vis-à-vis AFTV. In its brand vision (see figure 2) Arsenal focuses on making its fans proud wherever they are in the world, regardless of how they choose to follow the club. In doing so, the club supports the growth of its global fan base by enhancing fan experience and engagement. In addition, the Arsenal brand associates itself with: 1) on-field success; 2) winning trophies; 3) growing young talent; 4) having a magnificent stadium; 5) contributing to the community; and 6) self-financing (Arsenal, 2024).

Although Arsenal supports fan engagement, various sources imply that AFTV, a Fan TV YouTube channel that produces UGC, stimulates negative attitudes towards its brand. According to Halls (2017) Robbie Lyle, the founder of AFTV is viewed as controversial, with some fans criticising his channel's negative post-match interviews related to the performance of Arsenal. Likewise, Mayo (2020) notes that many AFTV influencers are controversial, with fans blaming them for catalysing a sense of rage

around the Arsenal football team. Another example is that of Troopz, a former AFTV influencer, who filmed himself being escorted out of Wembley stadium by security for uncooperative behaviour. This was just a few days after he had been filmed kicking seats inside the stadium after England drew with Scotland during the Euro 2020 tournament (Winters, 2021).

Figure 2: Arsenal's brand vision

What we stand for

Arsenal Football Club exists to make our fans proud wherever they are in the world and however they choose to follow us.

That pride is driven by success on the pitch. This means winning trophies. It also comes through our style of play, our focus on developing youth talent, our magnificent stadium, our broader contribution in the community and our self-financing approach.

Source: (Arsenal, 2024)

Furthermore, Arsenal restrained AFTV from using the brand name 'Arsenal' without its consent. This was in response to negative UGC on AFTV that was perceived by Arsenal to have potential detrimental effects on the club's brand name. This caused the Fan TV YouTube channel to change its name from 'Arsenal Fan TV' to 'AFTV' (Storer, 2018). The notion of 'brand name' is important to Aaker (1991) brand equity concept. He notes that 'brand name' is often the key asset of a firm and its damage can create undesirable attribute associations, damaging the brand's perceived quality, or altering existing brand associations. In addition, Wouters (2019) notes that negative UGC could have catastrophic consequences for brands and ultimately create negative brand perceptions, which harm the process of creating long-term Consumer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE). For Aaker (1991), managers have either a direct or indirect responsibility for brands and their equity, and they need to develop and protect the equity in their core brands.

From the foregoing discussion, there are three interrelated points that can be understood. First, there is a rapid growth of official social media channels of football clubs for fan engagement. The second point has to do with the rise of Fan TV YouTube channels for fan interactions. Thirdly, the autonomy of Fan TV YouTube channels raises questions about its risk to the brand equity of football clubs. In this sense, there

is a need to understand how brand equity exists within football official and Fan TV YouTube channels of football clubs.

1.3.3. Gaps in football research

Although studies in football (or soccer in America) are numerous, there has been limited research in football marketing. In Scimago's highly ranked journals, namely, Journal of Consumer Research, Journal of Marketing, and Journal of Marketing Research, a few studies have been conducted on football marketing over the last decade. These studies focused on consumer behaviour in the context of: controversial sponsors (Yang & Goldfarb, 2015); product transformation salience before football matches (Winterich et al., 2019); ritual chains and football atmospheres (Hill et al., 2021); and turnover service performance and demand in football (Eckert et al., 2021). On a wider scope of marketing research, few key studies on football marketing research have been undertaken within the last seven years. This includes studies that have focused on: marketing of unhealthy football (Ireland et al., 2021); football in the context of ambush marketing and sponsorship (Chavanat & Martinent, 2020); social capital and social media communications of a football club brand (Fenton, 2018); football in the context of value creation (Kolyperas et al., 2019); motivations of fans' social media behaviour and interactions with football clubs (Vale & Fernandes, 2018); and sport sponsorship and corruption (Roberts et al., 2017).

Research on brand equity of football clubs has also received little attention. According to Joanna and Zuzanna (2020) the study of social media in building sports brands is still young and not fully discovered by marketing departments in sports organisations. Moreover, Machado et al. (2020) note that there is scarce evidence of the linkages between social media, marketing and brand equity of football clubs. Similarly, Irianto and Kartikasari (2020) note that a lot of research on brand equity focuses on athletics, implying that there is a dearth of knowledge on football brand equity.

Although most sport clubs use social media to enhance fan engagement, and social media brand pages provide exceptional ways for engaging consumers, existing research has given limited attention to this area (Annamalai et al., 2021). Additionally, Lawrence and Crawford (2022) have noted that unofficial/unaffiliated podcasts and/or internet channels conceived, produced, edited and published by football enthusiasts is an emerging area of research. Furthermore, Lawrence and Crawford (2022) call for

studies to develop empirically, methodologically, and theoretically to better capture the nature of hyper-digitised societies and the way audiences are playing with, and shifting, the boundaries and possibilities for football.

Aichner (2019) proposes that understanding fan behaviour is not just relevant for football clubs but for other businesses who are trying to sell products and services to football fans who are one of the largest target groups in the world. Moreover, Joseph (2020) states that more football clubs are spending higher amounts of their own investments to collect as much data on their fans as they can. He adds that the better they understand the fandom around the sport, the easier it is for clubs to have to convince advertisers on why their media expenditure should be spent with them over competitors. Additionally, Anagnostopoulos et al. (2019) explain that marketing and communication strategies of football clubs should be informed by fan comments and semiotics of images on social media. This is especially because branding is still a key component of a professional sport team's marketing and commercial events, and the roles that star players and club history, for instance, play in such activities are well established in literature.

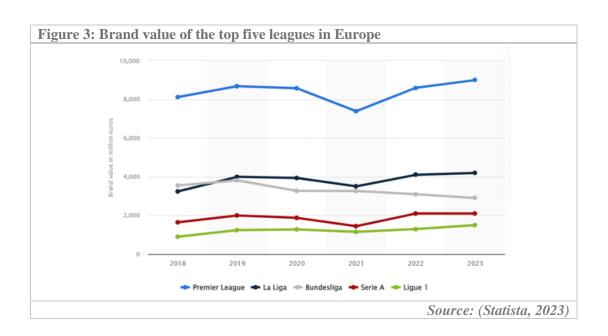
From the foregoing, there are four brief points to be made. The first has to do with scarcity of research that focuses on football from a marketing perspective. Second, is that there are few studies that have paid attention to social media, brand equity and football. Third, research required to better capture the nature of hyper-digitised societies and the way audiences are playing with, and shifting the boundaries and possibilities for football. Fourth, football clubs stand to benefit from research undertaken on comments of football fans made on social media. This makes conducting research on how brand equity exists within social media channels of football clubs, a critical and compelling proposition.

1.3.4. The EPL and Arsenal

As of 2022, FIFA (2022) indicated that there were five billion football fans globally, with Latin America, the Middle East and Africa representing the largest fan bases. They add that football's global appeal goes beyond enticing the interest of fans around the world. It attracts sponsors, broadcasters, club owners and football stars. More recently, as illustrated in table 3, football has the league with one of the highest annual revenues (\$9.8 billion) among the top sports leagues in the world.

Table 3: Revenues of the top sports leagues				
	Sport	League	Revenue	
1	Cricket	IPL (Indian Premier League)	\$11 billion	
2	Basketball	NBA (National Basketball Association)	\$10 billion	
3	Football	EPL (English Premier League)	\$9.8 billion	
4	Hockey	NHL (National Hockey League)	\$6.43 billion	
5	Tennis	ATP (Association of Tennis Professionals) Media	\$202.9 million	
Source: (Statista, 2024; Ross, 2024)				

In order to understand how brand equity exists within official and Fan TV YouTube channels, the EPL is an excellent organisation to focus on. It was established in 1992 as a limited company. Additionally, it is made up of twenty-member football clubs and is responsible for managing competitions including related business and broadcasting issues (Premier League, 2024). Chadwick et al. (2021) posit that the EPL is a brand that instigates the most widespread social media conversations, for example, when the EPL tweets, it stimulates a large volume of conversations directly linked to their tweets, thus making this league distinctive and worthy of further investigation if we are to understand the symbiotic relationship between sport and social media. Additionally, the EPL has a large social media following. This is exemplified through their combined following (Instagram, Facebook, X, YouTube and Tik Tok), which is 202.28 million as of the year 2024. Amongst the 'Big Five' leagues in Europe (England, Spain, Italy, Germany and France), the EPL has the highest brand value (9 billion euros) for the 2022/23 season (see figure 3).



This study uses Arsenal, which is a member of the EPL, as a vehicle for research. Most important for selecting this football club is that it was part of the leading teams in the league, in terms of points acquired, subscription of its official YouTube channel, and Fan TV YouTube channels established by fans respectively at the preliminary stage of this study in 2020 (see figure 4).

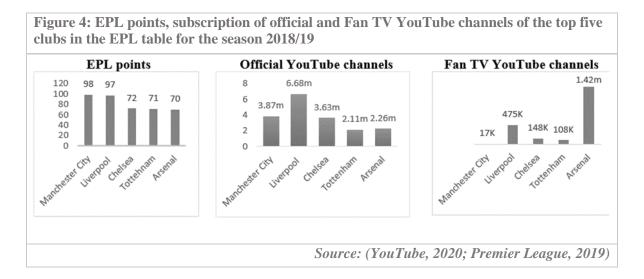
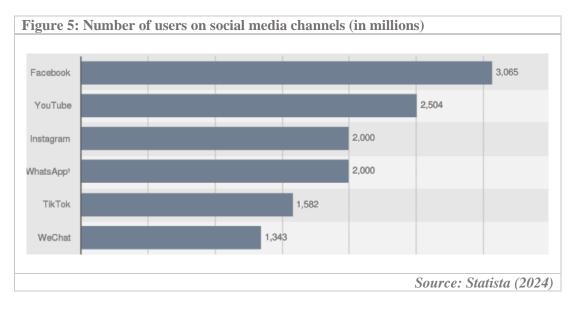


Figure 4 indicates that Manchester City garnered the highest points (98 points) in the EPL season 2018/19 making it the highest ranked team in on-field performance. Liverpool was the top team in terms of number of subscribers on their official YouTube channel with 6.68 million followers. AFTV, which was established by Arsenal fans stood as the leading Fan TV YouTube channel with 1.42 million subscribers. Hence, the AFTV subscribers represents 57 percent of Arsenal's official YouTube channel's subscription and reflects a high growth rate. Thus, it was expected that Arsenal will yield rich data on fan interactions required to understand how brand equity exists within its official YouTube channel and AFTV, a Fan TV YouTube channel established by its fans. Additionally, the relationship between Arsenal and AFTV could have distinctive features. For example, AFTV which is established by Arsenal fans, had a very high subscription, regardless of not having access to high-end exclusive club generated content. In contrast, The Redmen TV, a Fan TV YouTube channel which was established by Liverpool fans, was the only Fan TV channel among others that had access to exclusive Liverpool match highlights, yet it had a lower number of subscribers than AFTV. Finally, Arsenal is geographically located in North London, a diverse location in England. This is further indication that research on this club could generate diverse and rich data that will profoundly define both the local and global netnographic account in this study.

1.3.5. YouTube and sports marketing

To examine how brand equity exists within football social media channels, this study focuses on YouTube. Within the social media landscape, there are several social media platforms such as. Facebook, X, LinkedIn, Instagram and YouTube (Kozinets, 2020). Among these social media channels, Facebook and YouTube are the top most used channels worldwide (see figure 5). From the data in figure 5, it is evident that YouTube has approximately 2.5 billion users which is extremely high. It offers marketers a huge opportunity to access a growing social media platform and access a loyal audience. Moreover, it has grown from merely hosting video content to a brand powerhouse generating revenue for large firms and independent content creators (Lagiovane, 2018).

As early as 2005 when YouTube was emerging, the first video to reach one million views on the social media channel was a Nike football boot commercial (Stroud, 2022). In this commercial, Ronaldo de Assis Moreira (Ronaldinho), a Brazilian footballer who played for Football Club Barcelona at the time, was filmed hitting the goal crossbar three times without the ball touching the ground.



Adidas (2019), another sportswear company, used YouTube to market the Arsenal home kit for the 2019/20 EPL season. The 'Arsenal FC x Adidas 2019/20 home kit'

video included popular Arsenal players modelling the kit. It garnered a total of 1.84 million views. These examples highlight the prevalent use of YouTube for digital marketing purposes by sports brands in collaboration with athletes and football clubs.

1.4. Background of Arsenal

This section provides the background of Arsenal and serves to provide the contextual frame of the case selected for this study. An overview is provided of the football club's brand name and symbols as they are integral to their brand equity. Aaker (1991) iterates that a firm's names and symbols are brand assets and liabilities that either enhance or weaken the value of its products or services. Arsenal's signature story will be used to highlight its brand name and club symbols. Aaker (2024) explains that a signature story is an intriguing, authentic and involving narrative (as opposed to a stand-alone set of facts or features) that clarifies the brand.

1.4.1. Arsenal

Arsenal is based in Islington, North London, England. It is popularly known as 'the Gunners' in reference to the club's origins having been created by workers from an armament factory in Woolwich. The nickname pays homage to the club's crest which famously features a cannon (Goal, 2020). The club was founded by a group of friends led by a Scottish man known as David Danskin, a labourer at the Arsenal munitions factory in Woolwich, in 1886 (Arsenal, 2017). The original name of the club was 'Dial Square' after the factory workshops. Thereafter, it was named 'Royal Box' after a local pub, later on 'Arsenal' after their workplace and much later 'Royal Arsenal' until 1891. After relegation to a lower football league in 1913, Arsenal moved from Manor Ground to their famous stadium Highbury and within two years of the move, the club became known as 'Arsenal FC' (Arsenal, 2017). Afterwards, the club moved from Highbury to Emirates stadium in 2006, following a sponsorship deal between the club and Emirates giving the airline company rights to name the stadium (Arsenal, 2017). Arsenal's move from Highbury to the Emirates stadium was geared towards acquiring financial benefits from competing, and sustaining their competitiveness at the highest level. The then managing director Keith Edelman stated that, "Our aim is to be a leading European club and, once we get into the new stadium, we will be in that position. It is very income-generous to us" (Arsenal, 2017, para 7).

The Arsenal kit changed colours over the years (see figure 6). The original Arsenal kit was borrowed from former Nottingham Forest players and was dark red. However, the team manager, Herbert Chapman who arrived in 1925, launched the red and white Arsenal kit. The current shirt incorporates the club badge on the left-hand side of the shirt. Similarly, the Arsenal crest has evolved over the years (see figure 7). The first crest appeared on 20th October 1905 and features the Latin slogan 'Clamant Nostra Tela in Regis Querela' meaning 'Our weapons clash in the King's quarrel.' The cannons featured on the original crest are a reference to the armament factory influence in Woolwich and has remained a re-occurring theme over the years, including the new design.

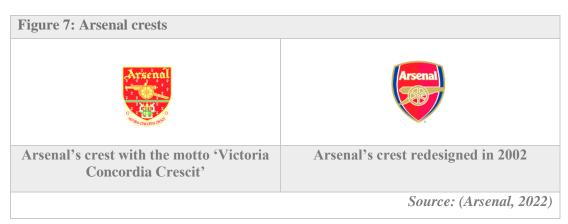
The club's identity advanced throughout the years, with a new badge featuring 'Arsenal' in gothic style typeface, a westward facing cannon, the Borough of Islington's coat of arms and ermine. The slogan for this badge was 'Victoria Concordia Crescit' in Latin, which means 'Victory grows out of harmony'. It originated from an article written by the editor Harry Homer (Marksman) of a newsletter (matchday programme) who turned to the Latin phrase because he lacked a quotation to close the season. In relation to Aaker (2024) views on signature stories, Harry Homer, can be seen as the hero behind Arsenal's slogan, he can also be viewed as a product of the Arsenal brand. In 1925, the badge was changed by Herbert Chapman (club manager) in collaboration with Claude Waterlow Ferrier (Architect of Highbury) in order to rebrand the club. The result was 'The Art Deco crest'. They designed a symbol with 'A' (Arsenal), the ball (Football), and the 'C' (Club). This was the first example of modern corporate branding in football. The club's identity advanced throughout the years and the decision to formulate a new crest in 2002 was taken to embrace the future and a move forward (Arsenal, 2017).

Figure 6: Arsenal kits

Arsenal's first kit 1886-1889

Arsenal's home kit 2022-2023

Source: (Arsenal, 2022)



1.4.2. Relevance to study

From the club's origin story, the Arsenal brand name and nickname 'the Gunners' is heavily linked with the unique stories of the club founders and their workplace (a munitions factory). With regard to Aaker's brand equity concept, this can be seen as brand association whereby, the value of a brand name can be based upon specific associations linked to it. In this case, the Arsenal brand can be associated with the workplace of the founders. Moreover, Aaker (2018) notes that signature stories can have all kinds of heroes who can be a product or a service. In the case of the Arsenal brand and its signature story, the founder David Danskin can be viewed as the hero. In relation to Aaker's views on signature stories, the hero David Danskin can thus be a product of the Arsenal brand.

Arsenal's background indicates that they moved from Highbury to the Emirates Stadium. In terms of Aaker's concept of brand equity, this can be seen as a brand awareness and a brand association effort whereby, the football club wanted football fans to both recognise and associate the Arsenal brand as a 'leading European club' in its effort to move to a more innovative and larger capacity stadium. In relation to

Aaker's concept of brand equity, Arsenal's redesigning their badge in 2002 can be seen as brand association. The Arsenal badge is part of the Arsenal brand through symbolism. Therefore, this symbol is associated with the 'munitions factory' in Woolwich. In view of Aaker's brand equity concept, Arsenal's endeavour to change and formulate a new crest in 2002 can be seen as a brand awareness and brand association effort whereby, the club wanted fans to be aware of and associate the Arsenal brand with a club that 'embraces the future'.

1.5. Background of Arsenal's official YouTube channel and AFTV

This section provides a background of the social media channels of this study, which are: 1) the official YouTube channel of Arsenal; and 2) AFTV, a Fan TV channel established by Arsenal fans.

1.4.1. Arsenal's official YouTube Channel

Arsenal's official YouTube channel was established on June 4th, 2013. The channel has 2.81 million subscribers. It offers fans a closer look at the personality of the club by offering Firm Generated Content (FGC) related to player conversations, behind the scenes footage on matchdays and player interviews based on X Takeovers (Arsenal, 2024).

1.4.2. AFTV

AFTV is a Fan TV YouTube channel established by Robbie Lyle popularly known as 'Don Robbie' in 2012. It is made up of fans of Arsenal. Additionally, it was formerly known as Arsenal Fan TV. The Fan TV YouTube channel was established to provide a platform for football fans to air their views without restriction or censorship before, during, and after football matches of Arsenal. AFTV invites viewers to follow them as they provide UGC such as football previews, watch alongs, fan cams, podcasts etc. It is not affiliated to Arsenal's official YouTube channel (AFTV, 2022). According to Kempton (2021), Robbie (the founder of AFTV) is a devoted fan of Arsenal and adds that he went to Highbury (Arsenal's former stadium) every week. Furthermore, Robbie wanted to give fans an opportunity to share their opinion on matters concerning the club. With no knowledge on social media or filming, he collaborated with a friend in carrying out fan interviews outside the Emirates Stadium, and uploaded the videos

on YouTube under the channel Arsenal Fan TV at the time. The YouTube channel, now AFTV, has amassed a subscription of 1.67 million subscribers (AFTV, 2024).

1.6. Contribution to theory

Based on the rationale, background of Arsenal, and backgrounds of Arsenal's official YouTube channel and AFTV, this section surmises how they have led this research to theory. In addition, it provides the theoretical and methodological approach of this research. In the previous sections, the rationale of this study was discussed including, the case of this study. There are three major points that can be understood from these accounts. First, there are gaps in knowledge regarding the contribution of social media, including football official and Fan TV YouTube channels for the promotion of brand equity. Second, there are gaps in football research which include: 1) limited research on football from a marketing perspective; 2) scant scholarship examining social media, brand equity and football; and 3) little attention to the nature of hyper-digitised societies and how they are playing with, and shifting the boundaries and possibilities for football. Third, is the call for research on fan behaviour in social media that informs digital marketing and branding of football clubs. Accordingly, football clubs need research that helps them nurture, maintain and protect their brand equity. This is warranted bearing in mind that football and the EPL, including Arsenal have a high lucrative brand value. Moreover, Arsenal's signature story, indicates that it has a brand with a long history of change and brand equity efforts. From the foregoing, this study contributes to theory as follows:

1.5.1. Explore how brand equity exists within a particular social media context

This research aims at generating a theoretical understanding of how brand equity exists within official and fan TV YouTube channels of football clubs. Using Aakers brand equity theory as a theoretical lens, it provides an explanatory account of how brand equity exists within a particular social media context. According to Aaker (1991, p. 27), brand equity is "a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol, that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm's customers." Integral to Aaker's concept of brand equity are its five dimensions, namely brand loyalty, perceived quality, brand association, brand awareness and other proprietary brand assets. Nevertheless, it is important according

to Aaker (1991) to address how brand equity is created—the driving determinants of brand equity, how a brand should be managed over time, and actions that meaningfully affect the elements of brand equity. Accordingly, this study addresses how brand equity is created in football official and Fan TV YouTube channels. Thus, showcasing how brand equity is created in these social media channels should provide insight to football clubs on how to manage their brands over time including what actions will affect their brand equity.

1.5.2. Generate new brand equity dimensions through netnography

As a netnography, this research will analyse how digital data traces from participants of official and Fan TV YouTube channels lead to the brand equity of football clubs. Kozinets (2020, p. 14) defines netnography as "a form of qualitative research that seeks to understand the cultural experiences that encompass and are reflected within the traces, practices, networks and systems of social media." In its conception, Kozinets (2020) strived to establish a discipline that adapted ethnographic and qualitative research methods to the novel and still emerging contingencies of social media environments. For him, netnography ensures that a cornucopia of unique meanings and themes emerge from the data.

In applying netnography, this study seeks to develop new brand equity dimensions that may exist within football official YouTube channels of football clubs and Fan TV YouTube channels. Aaker (1991) recommends that it is useful to explicitly include other brand equity dimensions as outputs of brand equity as well as inputs, even though they do not appear in his theoretical framework. Kozinets (2020) gives netnography investigative, interactive and immersive roles within data collection and analysis processes. Accordingly, the researcher selects from among the vast and everincreasing wealth of informational traces created in the act of communication between people on social media (investigative level). In addition, the researcher begins interviewing, posting a public question, commenting with a query, asking via email or direct messaging, conducting mobile ethnography, using a digital diary, or utilising a research webpage (interactive level). Finally, the researcher evaluates and filters what is to become meaningful netnographic data from among the vast amount of social media information flowing through public and private online communications (immersive level).

Within this context, the netnographic data for this study is collected through the use of an investigative method that incorporates the following two immersion journals to non-obtrusively observe Arsenal's official YouTube community and AFTV's YouTube community during the EPL season 2022/23: IJ 1—An immersion dedicated to Arsenal's official YouTube channel; and IJ 2—An immersion journal dedicated to AFTV. The data will then be subjected to immersive analysis, meaning that it will be subjected to content grouped into themes and then sub-themes. The broad categories will then generate the brand dimensions that are integral to brand equity. This approach will enable the development of brand equity dimensions that can and cannot be explained within Aaker (1991) brand equity concept.

1.7. Research questions

The main research question for this study is: **How does brand equity exist within football official and Fan TV YouTube channels?** To support this question, the following sub-questions are identified:

- 1. How is the brand equity of a football club showcased through digital data traces within football official and Fan TV YouTube channels?
- 2. How is the brand equity of a football club showcased comparatively with regard to football official and Fan TV YouTube channels?
- 3. How do various fan segments within football official and Fan TV YouTube channels showcase brand equity of a football club?
- 4. How do digital data traces within football official and Fan TV YouTube channels showcase new and interrelated brand equity dimensions?
- 5. How can football clubs nurture and maintain brand equity within football official and Fan TV YouTube channels?

The following sub-sections provide further clarification on the research questions.

1.6.1. Question 1

The first question [How is the brand equity of a football club showcased through digital data traces within football official and Fan TV YouTube channels?] emanates from the following three research gaps: First is the growth of social media and its unclear significance in sports marketing. This is in view of divergent results indicating the positive contribution of social media (Rico et al., 2019; Anagnostopoulos et al., 2019; Hurst & Plastiras, 2017) and the negative impact of social media to sports marketing (Fenton, 2018). Second, official and Fan TV YouTube channels and their influence on the brand equity of football clubs needs to be understood. This is in view of the rapid growth of official social media channels (Fenton & Helleu, 2018), fan social media channels, and their potential to either nurture or threaten the brand equity of football clubs. Third is the scarcity of football marketing research including social media and brand equity in relation to football clubs (Machado et al., 2020; Irianto & Kartikasari, 2020; Annamalai et al., 2021).

1.6.2. Question 2

The second question [How is the brand equity of a football club showcased comparatively with regard to football official and Fan TV YouTube channels?] is spurred by the differences between the two channels. Official YouTube channels are controlled by football clubs whereas Fan TV channels are controlled by football club fans. In this context, official YouTube channels provide fans with Firm Generated Content (FGC) as noted by Coleciv et al. (2019) while Fan TV YouTube channels primarily provide UGC as highlighted by (Krumm et al., 2008). Hence, official and Fan TV YouTube channels may showcase brand equity of football clubs in different ways. Showcasing these differences is important because it may help football clubs understand how to interact with football fans on Fan TV YouTube channels, which is crucial to their reputation and brand. Checchinato and Designa (2015) note that clubs have less control over brand related interaction within UGC platforms, however interacting with these platforms provides access to a plethora of relevant information about fan habits. Moreover, UGC humanises brands, increases personalisation, Search Engine Optimization (SEO), takes advantage of content creation, helps to grow social media, and brings a tangible asset value without significant investment (Simons & Bird, 2023). Thus, this question aims at providing new knowledge on the differences between official and Fan TV YouTube channel interactions where brand equity is concerned. This research question is also underpinned by Arsenal's distinguished characteristics. The club can be viewed in terms of: 1) on-field performance; 2) subscription of official YouTube channels; 3) subscription of Fan TV YouTube channels; and 4) geographical locations. Additionally, the unique characteristics of the football club may have implications on how its brand equity is showcased within its official YouTube channel and AFTV. Therefore, this question aims at providing new knowledge on these characteristics. Indeed, comparison amplifies our awareness of systems, cultures, and patterns of thinking and acting, which can ultimately lead to the development of a universally applicable theory (Esser & Vliegenthart, 2017). Furthermore, comparative studies analyse and review phenomena among different areas to spot similarities and/or differences (Coccia & Benati, 2018).

1.6.3. Question 3

The third question [How do various fan segments within football official and Fan TV YouTube channels showcase brand equity of a football club?] is informed by the scarcity of research on fan segmentation in sports marketing and the importance of differences among fan segments. Fan segmentation utilises data to divide fans into a limited, useful number of segments that help define, and personify different groups of fans, thus, it helps in understanding how fans engage with the club and therefore target communications that are related to a more remote, but not necessarily detached form of fan engagement (Davies, 2020). The diverse nature of fan segments within official and Fan TV YouTube channels may have implications on how brand equity of football clubs is showcased. This study will utilise posteriori fan segmentation, which is data driven by current research (Dolnicar & Leisch, 2003). Thus, this question aims at providing new knowledge on how emerging fan segments within official and Fan TV YouTube channels showcase brand equity of football clubs.

1.6.4. Question 4

The fourth question [How do digital data traces within official and Fan TV YouTube channels showcase new and interrelated brand equity dimensions?] is devoted towards making a theoretical contribution to Aaker's work. For Aaker (1991), the five dimensions of brand equity are brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality,

brand associations, and other proprietary brand assets. Aaker (1991) notes that brand equity is important for both customers and firms. For example, it provides purchase confidence, enhances customer satisfaction, and enhances efficiency and effectiveness of marketing programs for firms. This is discussed in further detail within this thesis. He also maintains that the brand equity dimensions can be utilised by schools of management where faculty and students are attempting to improve how brand equity is managed. However, other researchers have indicated that further research can focus on developing more brand equity dimensions especially, in areas such as sport and social media (Shariq, 2018; Veloutsou et al., 2020; Rojas-Lamorena et al., 2022). Therefore, this question aims at not only adapting Aaker's brand equity dimensions but also capturing new and emerging brand equity dimensions that are showcased within a particular social media context. This research question is also informed by the interrelationships within Aaker (1991) brand equity theoretical framework. Aaker (1991) asserts that there exist interrelationships among his brand equity dimensions. For example, perceived quality could be influenced by awareness (a visible name is likely to be well made), by associations (a visible spokesperson would only endorse a quality product), and by loyalty (a loyal customer would not like a poor product). Aaker points out that it might be useful to explicitly explore other interrelationships among the brand equity dimensions. Therefore, this question aims to provide new knowledge on these interrelationships in a particular social media context.

1.6.5. Question 5

The fifth question [How can football clubs nurture and maintain brand equity within official and Fan TV YouTube channels?] is concerned with making a contribution to football marketing practice. Indeed, researchers have called for football marketing research to be linked to practice towards improving digital marketing of football clubs (Aichner, 2019; Anagnostopoulos et al., 2019). Aaker recommends that his brand equity theory should be used by managers who are responsible for brands and their equity. In this context, Aaker (1991, p. 38) notes that "it is not enough to avoid damaging a brand, it needs to be nurtured and maintained. The danger is that by the time that damage to the brand is recognized, it is too late. The cost of correcting a problem can be extremely high relative to the cost of maintaining equity." Thus, this

question aims at providing recommendations on how marketing practitioners can develop, nurture, maintain and protect the brand equity of football clubs.

1.8. Research map

The research map depicted by table 4 provides a visual overview of the various research components of this study. It illustrates the linkage between the research gaps, research questions, literature, data source, and contribution to knowledge (see table 4).

	Main research question: How does brand equity exist within football official and Fan TV YouTube channels?				
	Research gaps	Research question	Literature	Data source	Contribution to knowledge
1	Scarcity and inconclusive results in social media, brand equity and sports marketing research	How is the brand equity of a football club showcased through digital data traces within football official and Fan TV YouTube channels?	Social media, brand equity and football studies	Participant observation through an immersion journal	Contributes to sport, brand equity and digital marketing knowledge by providing an account of how brand equity exists within a particular social media context
2	Gap in research on the differences between contribution of official vis- à-vis fan social media channels to brand equity	How is the brand equity of a football club showcased comparatively with regard to football official and Fan TV YouTube channels?	Official and Fan TV YouTube channels	Participant observation through an immersion journal	To advance the understanding of the different ways in how brand equity is showcased within official vis-à-vis Fan social media channels and amongst fans of Arsenal within these social media channels
3	Importance of fan segmentation and scarcity of research on football fan segmentation within official and Fan TV YouTube channels in relation to brand equity	How do various fan segments within football official and Fan TV YouTube channels showcase brand equity of a football club?	Sports fan segmentation	Participant observation through an immersion journal	Provides a comparative account of how brand equity exists within various fan segments
4	Calls for research on developing more brand equity dimensions. Moreover, it might be useful to explicitly explore other interrelationships among the brand equity dimensions (Aaker, 1991).	How do digital data traces within football official and Fan TV YouTube channels showcase new and interrelated brand equity dimensions?	Brand equity theory	Participant observation through an immersion journal	New knowledge on new brand equity dimensions showcased within social media channels; and interrelationships of brand equity dimensions showcased within social media channels
5	Calls for football marketing research to be linked to practice towards improving digital marketing of football clubs	How can football clubs nurture and maintain brand equity within football official and Fan TV YouTube channels?	Football marketing practice research	Participant observation through an immersion journal	Recommendations on how marketing practitioners can develop, nurture, maintain and protect the brand equity of their football clubs

1.9. Personal motivation

The personal motivation of this research is heavily influenced by my academic journey. It began when I undertook my BSc degree in International Business Administration, majoring in marketing at the United States International University -Africa (USIU-A). Here, I chose to study marketing because of my fascination with the unique stories behind brands and how consumers behave towards these brands. This eventually led me to conduct a study titled, 'Factors Influencing Youth to Patronise Branded Footwear in Nairobi' for my final year project. After finishing my BSc degree in marketing, I was fortunate enough to continue my academic journey at Salford Business School (SBS) where I completed my MSc in Digital Marketing. Here, I acquired an interest in the use of social media for marketing by organisations. Additionally, I developed an interest in the unique stories behind online consumer behaviour towards brands, thus being inspired to conduct a study titled, 'Influence of Social Media Marketing on Selection of Footwear Brands by Youth in the UK'. Apart from my academic journey, my strong love for football played a big role in motivating me to undertake my PhD in the area of football. I began my journey as an Arsenal fan in Nairobi, in the year 2004. In this period, I noticed that all my peers had a slight sense of arrogance when they spoke about Manchester United FC, the football club they pledged their allegiance to. In this sense, I wanted to be different and separate myself from the flock, thus I made Arsenal my club of choice and I've never looked back since. As a long-time supporter of Arsenal, I have been in and amongst football fan culture, interacting and debating over matters football on YouTube, Instagram, Facebook and X from the year 2008, with the aid of a mobile phone and a laptop. Additionally, for a long-time, I have been a part of Fan TV communities, most notably AFTV. It is at the time of immense growth of football Fan TV YouTube channels and their influence on online football fan communities combined with various gaps in digital and sport marketing literature, that I decided to incorporate these channels into my PhD research. Thus, with my interest in football, social media marketing, and previous research in the nuances behind consumer behaviour towards brands, I was motivated to conduct a study on football fans within Fan TV YouTube channels. Moreover, it was an intriguing period as these channels were rapidly growing as mentioned earlier in this chapter, and I observed this both as a fan and a researcher.

Interest in brand equity of football clubs arose from reading about frameworks that dictate the success of brands in both short-term and long-term marketing strategies. Additionally, my interests in sport and social media marketing led me into delivering a module titled, 'Sport in the digital world' at Salford Business School as an associate lecturer. After this, my interest in digital marketing moved me into delivering a workshop titled, 'Digital business and new technology' at the University of Chester as a visiting lecturer. My interest in social media marketing has also led me into delivering various digital marketing lectures and workshops at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) as a visiting lecturer, and into contributing towards the chapter 'Orchestrating social media optimisation' in the third edition of a text book titled, 'Digital Marketing – A Results Driven Approach.' Last but not least, the use of netnography to uncover nuances of football fan behaviour towards football club brands arose as a valuable supervisory suggestion. Lastly, the title of this thesis, 'In the middle of the park' was a result of valuable insight from Prof. Robert Kozinets, the founding father of netnography, during Netnocon 2023 at Media City UK, Salford.

1.10. Structure of the thesis

This thesis is made up of eight chapters. These include:

- Introduction—This chapter has discussed the research problem of this study and set out the background and rationale for the study.
- Literature Review I²: SMBCs—This chapter provides a critical review of literature on SMBCs and their relevance to this study. In particular, it reviews literature on official and Fan TV YouTube channels.
- Literature Review II: Brand Equity—This chapter develops a conceptual framework for this study where particular attention is paid to the theory of brand equity.
- Methodology—This chapter describes the research methodology of this study, which includes areas such as research design, philosophy, methodological choice, strategies, netnography etc.

² The literature review of this thesis is divided into Literature Review I and II because of the large scale of literature concerning SMBCs and Brand Equity.

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- Data analysis and findings I³: Arsenal's official YouTube Channel—This chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the data collected from immersion within Arsenal's official YouTube channel.
- Data analysis and findings II: AFTV—This chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the data collected from immersion within AFTV.
- Discussion—This chapter triangulates empirical netnography and literature review thus bringing together the primary and secondary data collected for this research. It aims to provide arguments as to whether the data contradicts or is in agreement with literature in order to contribute to both theory and practice.
- Conclusion—This chapter presents a summary of this study's main contributions. In addition, it recommends areas for further research.

³ The data analysis and findings of this thesis are divided into Data analysis and findings I and Data analysis and findings II because of the large scale of data analysis findings concerning Arsenal's official YouTube channel and AFTV respectively.

LITERATURE REVIEW I: SMBCs

2.1. Introduction

This chapter reviews relevant literature on SMBCs, which are the phenomenon of this study, and are integral to this study's research questions. Accordingly, it begins with an overview of SMBCs which highlights literature on these communities, and the rise of SMBCs in sports. The chapter also highlights literature on the related concepts of SMBCs whose connections play a crucial role in the formation of SMBCs. This is followed by a section that discusses key issues regarding brand engagement in official and user SMBCs, which form the basis of brand engagement within football official and Fan TV YouTube channels. This chapter also includes a section that discusses literature on fan segmentation in sport brand communities depicting the importance of classifying sports fans based on their unique characteristics for suitable brand engagement. This is trailed by a section that depicts the literature gaps that this study aims to address. A summary of the chapter is then presented.

The literature review strategy for this study follows Kozinets (2020) guide for exploring the phenomenon of a study. This strategy is depicted in table 5, which illustrates the crucial questions that Kozinets (2020) recommends should be addressed when presenting a literature review. He recommends that the researcher should review literature, including relevant news and academic articles, to determine what has been written about the phenomenon of a study. This ultimately leads to the discerning of research questions that are based on patterns, gaps, and unspoken assumptions within relevant literature.

Tal	Table 5: Kozinets' guide for literature review			
	Questions to be addressed	Sources		
1.	What has been written about this phenomenon already?			
2.	What discernible patterns exist in literature about this topic?	News articles Academic articles		
3.	What gaps do you detect in the collective knowledge?			
4.	What unspoken assumptions could you challenge?			

2.2. Overview of SMBCs

This section reviews literature on SMBCs which are the focus of this study. It thus begins by reviewing literature on brand communities as they form the basis of SMBCs. Thereafter, it reviews literature of SMBCs and SMBCs in sport. It then discusses the rise of hyperdigitalised football brand communities (Lawrence & Crawford, 2022).

2.2.1. SMBCs

The concept of brand community is an important construct for the definition of SMBCs. The earliest definition of brand communities is provided by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001). They define brand communities as specialised non-geographically bound communities based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand. Veloutsou and Moutinho (2009) define a brand community as "an enduring, self-selected group of consumers, sharing a system of values, standards and representations, who accept and recognise bonds of membership with each other and with the whole" (p. 316). More recently, Aaker (2020) defines brand communities as brand enthusiasts or groups of people who bond because of a collective involvement in some activity or interest area linked to a brand. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) explain that due to the global nature of brands, they surpass geography enabling them to include a large number of members who possess an awareness of mass-media. They further note that brand communities showcase, three traditional markers, namely, consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, and moral responsibility as indicated below:

Consciousness of kind—this is the element or marker that is of utmost importance. It refers to the important connection that members feel towards the brand but more importantly the stronger connection toward one another despite having never met. Processes that foster consciousness of kind are legitimacy (ascertaining authentic members) and oppositional brand loyalty (opposition to competing brands). In football, Webster (2012) asserts that fan communities of Everton, a football club brand in the Merseyside county of England are in opposition towards football rivals Liverpool, a football club brand in the same area. He notes that it is common that both Liverpool and Everton brand colours (red and blue respectively) are embraced by different family members in Merseyside county.

- **ii Rituals and traditions**—these are brand community rituals and traditions that function to maintain the culture of the community. They are used to reproduce and transmit the meaning of a community based on shared consumption experiences with the brand. Such rituals and traditions include celebrating brand history, sharing stories based on brand experiences etc. In football, Platt (2023) notes that fan communities of Liverpool, a football club brand in England always sing the anthem 'You'll Never Walk Alone' before every football match at their home stadium, Anfield.
- iii Moral responsibility—this is a sense of duty to the community which produces collective action and group cohesion. It is manifested in two critical tasks, namely: 1) integrating and retaining members; and 2) assisting brand community members in the proper use of the brand's product and/or service. In football, Willcocks (2022) highlights that fan communities of Bayern Munich, a football club brand in Munich, Germany, staged mass anti-Qatar World Cup 2022 protests during football matches. This was done to showcase their disregard for the treatment of immigrant workers by construction companies contracted to build the Qatar World Cup 2022 football stadiums.

Emotional attachment, admiration, and interest in a brand is central to SMBCs. Various scholars highlight the importance of emotional attachment within brand communities. Khamwon and Pornsrimate (2018) state that brand love within brand communities leads to brand evangelism, which includes purchase intention, positive brand referrals, and oppositional brand referrals—which is disparaging comments to other brands. Coelho et al. (2019) found that a brand community may reinforce the bonds between members, between members and the brand, attract new members and new customers, establish long-lasting relationships, and increase brand loyalty. In a study on transnational solidarities and love in football, Petersen-Wagner (2018) found that strong and, in some instances, irrational bonds were central in Liverpool's football brand communities. He noted that fans used the word love as a metaphor to describe their emotional connection with Liverpool. This emotional connection was kindled by fellow fans. In some cases, he found that fans could not explain why they love Liverpool.

Various authors note that brand communities exist within computer mediated environments. Ul-Islam and Rahman (2017) contend that online brand communities

are communities that focus on the brand as the focal point in their interactions within computer mediated environments. In a similar vein, Brogi (2014) defines SMBCs as brand communities within computer-mediated environments where members interact with each other exchanging and sharing information and emotions. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), and Aaker (2020) both acknowledge the element of computer mediation for brand communities. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) note that brand communities are not restricted by geography due to the rise of modern communications, including computer mediated communication, that make modern marketing possible. Aaker (2020) asserts that digital technology has fundamentally improved the power and relevance of brand communities by enabling their membership to quickly expand geographically and demographically.

The importance of brand communities for brands has been highlighted by Aaker (2020). He explains that brand communities help brands as they enhance brand relationships, add energy and involvement, provide credibility, and build barriers to competitors as indicated below:

- i Enhanced brand relationships—this occurs when a brand is involved as an active partner with an activity that is important to a customer, thus building a brand relationship. This relationship is enhanced when the brand is associated with consumers' shared interests of the brand. It is magnified when consumers identify themselves with the brand community. Stanciu (2021) notes that Adidas, a sportswear company, has created a strong relationship with its customers through its slogan 'Impossible is nothing,' which resonates with its brand communities' sporting activities.
- ii Additional energy and visibility—this occurs when a consumer (not the brand) within the community initiates brand engagement, thus rewarding the brand with added energy and visibility. Hong (2015) asserts that brand enthusiasts of the motorcycle company Harley Davidson have a brand community titled 'Harley Owners Group' that is not initiated by Harley Davidson but Harley Davidson consumers. This provides additional energy and visibility to the Harley Davidson brand.
- iii Credibility to members and brand partners—when brand communities are viewed as a group of valued and trusted friends, the brand gains credibility, as it is seen as 'one of us' and not the seller; and information from the brand

community is perceived as credible (not biased, deceiving and self-serving). Harrower (2021) explains that Apple, a mobile phone company, has a brand community known as the 'Apple Support Community.' He states that it is successful because it offers an avenue for feedback, self-service support, peer to peer support and knowledge transfer. The Apple brand is viewed as credible within its brand community as Apple products are part of their consumers' identity.

- **iv Barriers to competitors**—Regular engagement of the consumers within the brand community will enhance brand affinity making it difficult to be attracted by brands from competitors. This occurs when a brand community creates brand loyalty. Marzocchi et al. (2013) state that brand loyalty is primarily influenced by identification with a brand community.
- v A source of new and enhanced product/service ideas—this occurs when customers within brand communities actively participate in the development and refinement of products/services by providing useful and timely brand information. Harrower (2021) notes that Lego, a Danish toy company, has a successful brand community known as the 'Lego Community,' which is successful because it encourages Lego customers to share and submit product development and Lego construction ideas.

Based on the above discussion, this study proposes that SMBCs are brand communities that experience: consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, moral responsibility, share a common interest in a brand and exist in computer mediated environments such as social media platforms. Brands and social media platforms are expounded on in section 2.3. In addition, other concepts related to SMBCs such as social media, social media marketing and community are discussed in section 2.3. SMBCs can exist within different industries such as sport.

2.2.2. SMBCs and sports

Herein, this subsection discusses literature on SMBCs in the context of sport. It provides relevant literature on sport SMBCs with regard to its various characteristics and provides a definition of sport SMBCs. It then discusses sport SMBCs in the context of hyperdigitalised football fan communities.

2.2.2.1. Sport SMBCs

Before the advent of social media, sport brand communities such as football brand communities could be traced back to the 1980s when these communities were dominated by working class people. The communities or 'casuals' as they were popularly known, had distinct characteristics or markers: love for football, adorning fashion trends and engaging in physical fights in defence of their clubs (hooliganism) (Petersen-Wagner, 2018; Taylor, 2019). Figure 8 shows English football brand communities in the 1980s.

Figure 8: Casuals, a part of English football culture in the 1980s

Source: Taylor (2019)

With the arrival of social media, sport brand communities such as the 'casuals' above have evolved into sports SMBCs, which have been defined as fan communities that use social media to share sports brand information such as sports team news, video highlights and player profiles (Byon et al., 2018); and share common emotional bonds and a shared identity (Wagner, 2021); that are enhanced through traditions and bonding with fellow fans (Petersen-Wagner, 2018). Sport SMBCs have the following key features: 1) they are created by both football clubs and their fans through social media platforms; and 2) they operate at different levels which include, team level (e.g. Arsenal's official YouTube page), association level (e.g. EPL, FIFA, Formula 1), and at sport level (e.g. r/soccer's Reddit page) (Fenton & Helleu, 2018; Wagner, 2021). Various scholars have noted that fans join sport SMBCs for various reasons. These include functional value (perceived utility), emotional value (feelings aroused from perceived utility), epistemic value (knowledge about the brand), entertainment value (enjoyable content), bonding value (feelings of community and connection), and experience sharing (Kaur et al., 2018; Krzyżowski & Strzelecki, 2022; Santos et al.,

2022; Chen & Huang, 2022; Sturm, 2020). Table 6 presents examples of sport SMBCs in various social media platforms:

Tal	Table 6: Examples of sport SMBCs			
	Social media platform	Description		
1.	X	Chelsea Fan TV: This football fan community comprises lifelong Chelsea fans who love to travel around the world following Chelsea Football Club (FC). The community shares engaging and exciting videos that revolve around Chelsea FC.		
		Source: (Chelsea Fan TV, 2022)		
2.	Tumblr	Being Liverpool: This football fan community was established in 2013. It is dedicated to sharing UGC about Liverpool FC.		
		Source: (Being Liverpool, 2023)		
3.	Reddit	r/Barca: This football fan community is dedicated towards sharing news about FC Barcelona and discussing the football club's activities.		
		Source: (r/Barca, 2023)		
4.	LinkedIn	Enthusiasts of Formula 1: This car racing fan community was founded in 2007. It is the first unofficial Formula 1-related racing group on LinkedIn where fans of the top tier automobile racing sport can participate in discussions about races, drivers, and the current state of Formula 1.		
		Source: (Enthusiasts of Formula 1, 2023)		
5.	Facebook	Everton FC Fan Group: This football fan community was established in 2017 and is dedicated to Everton fans who are part of the football club's biggest fan site, the Grand Old Team.		
		Source: (Everton FC Fan Group, 2023)		
6.	Flickr	Newcastle United: This football fan community of Newcastle FC fans and is dedicated towards Newcastle FC-related photos and discussions.		
		Source: (Newcastle United, 2023)		
7.	YouTube	AFTV: This football fan community was established in 2012 and is dedicated to fans of Arsenal. It is a Fan TV YouTube channel that offers Arsenal fans an opportunity to share their opinion and participate in conversations about the football club.		
		Source: (AFTV, 2023)		

Various authors have discussed sports SMBCs with regard to the rise of hyperdigitalised football brand communities.

2.2.2.2. Hyperdigitalised football brand communities

The emergence of hyperdigitalised football brand communities, which is nascent to the new and hyper digital era, warrants scholarly attention. This view has been proposed by Lawrence and Crawford (2022). At the centre of hyperdigitalised football brand communities is the growing use of social media. Petersen-Wagner (2018) maintains that these communities have constant brand engagement with football clubs and other supporters made possible by the pervasiveness of social media. Lawrence and Crawford (2018) posit that hyperdigitalisation within football brand communities is determined by four simultaneous processes, namely: 1) the rapid digital technological advancement; 2) the accessibility and sharing proficiencies of social and mobile media; 3) increased digital literacy amongst football fans; and 4) a great emphasis on gaining brand information. Hyperdigitalisation in football can for instance be seen in the concurrent use of digital devices to connect with a football club brand. This is viewed as a 'second screen practice,' where fans watch a football match and communicate with other fans on SMBCs at the same time (Krzyżowski & Strzelecki, 2022; Sturm, 2020).

Based on the above discussion, two points are noted: 1) sport SMBCs are brand enthusiasts or groups of fans on social media that bond because of a collective involvement in activities or interests linked to a sports brand; and 2) sport SMBCs that are emerging as hyperdigitalised football brand communities are a recent development.

2.3. SMBCs and related concepts

This section reviews literature on the related concepts of SMBCs. These concepts are: community, brands, social media and social media marketing. The section also reviews literature on online communities and presents a visual representation of SMBCs.

2.3.1. Community

MacQueen et al. (2001) defines community as a group of people with varied characteristics who are connected by social ties, share common perceptions, and engage in a cooperative action in geographical locations or settings. In community scholarship, Bradshaw (2008) contends that one of the continuous debates is about the definition of community, especially whether the concept of community includes groups of people who share common interests and interaction but who do not share common geographical locality. He adds that in a highly mobile society where people are connected by interest rather than traditional hometowns, it no longer makes sense to confine community to place thus, it is useful to define community in terms of the networks of people tied together by solidarity, a shared identity and set of norms, that does not necessarily reside in a place. Chavis and Lee (2015) assert that community is both a feeling and a set of relationships among people, and that the meeting of common needs plays a significant role in the formation of communities. They contend that the meaning of community needs more contemplation and discussion than it is usually given and moving forward, researchers must embrace this complexity. In this sense, Yashim (2023) assertion that cultures or groups of people within a community display behaviours, beliefs, and symbols that they accept, and are shared by communication and imitation. After a comprehensive review of 254 community related studies, in their study on understanding community, Cobigo et al. (2016) define community as "A group of people that interact and support each other, and are bounded by shared experiences or characteristics, a sense of belonging, and often by their physical proximity" (p. 192).

Cohen (2015) asserts that a community enables similarities to be shared and acts as a differentiator between itself and other communities. In doing so, he discusses four key ideas on symbolic construction of community:

1. The use of the word 'Community' suggests that members of a group have something in common with each other which significantly differentiates them from members of other groups. Community thus seems to imply both similarity and difference at the same time. In football, Hyland (2020) asserts that members within football fan communities adopt a 'we are us, and we are also not them' attitude when distinguishing themselves to rival football fan communities. This suggests that football fan communities have similar

- interests centred on the football club they support hence adopting the 'we are us' attitude, and strongly differentiate themselves from rival football fan communities hence adopting the 'we are also not them' attitude.
- 2. Community is that entity to which one belongs, greater than association but more immediately than the notion we call 'society.' It is the area in which people acquire their most fundamental and most substantial experience of social life outside the confines of the home. In football, Fulham, a football club in England, aims to support young people and help them build life skills by building local football communities (Premier League, 2023).
- 3. In communities, members learn the meaning of kinship through being able to perceive its boundaries, learn 'friendship,' and acquire the sentiments of close social association and the capacity to express or otherwise manage these in their social relationships. At a community level, in Nigeria football communities have been used to build friendships among members of different tribes, origins and backgrounds. In addition, sport has been a tool used to encourage strong community bonds, promote social cohesion, and reduce crime rates (UN Development Programme, 2021).
- 4. Ultimately, Cobigo et al. (2016) note that community is where one learns and continues to practice how to 'be social.' At the risk of substituting one indefinable category for another, it is where one acquires culture.

Chavis and Lee (2015) note five key characteristics of communities:

- 1. People live in multiple communities—There are communities based on neighbourhood, nation, faith, politics, race or ethnicity, age, gender and hobbies (Chavis & Lee, 2015).
- 2. Communities form sub communities—This can be seen in a neighbourhood community for instance, where there may be ethnic or racial communities, communities based on people of different ages and with different needs, and communities based on common economic interests (Chavis & Lee, 2015).
- Communities form formal institutions—To effectively fulfil their needs people
 create communities in the form of large organisations and systems such as
 schools, government, faith, law enforcement, or the non-profit sector to more
 effectively fulfil their needs (Chavis & Lee, 2015).

- 4. Communities form informal institutions—People form informal communities based on social or cultural networks of helpers and leaders such as council of elders, barbershops, rotating credit and savings associations, and gardening clubs. In sport, Cloake (2014) notes that the roots of English football clubs largely lie in efforts of churches and factories who formed informal institutions centred on football. They formed these institutions to combat people's drinking and violent behaviour by creating informal communities that would provide more wholesome opportunities for people to put their energies into. These football communities birthed the early giants of English football who came from towns such as Blackburn, Preston, Burnley, Manchester, Sheffield, Birmingham, Bolton, Derby, Nottingham and Stoke. In addition, according to the EFL (2023), the twelve founding members of the first football league were Accrington, Aston Villa, Blackburn Rovers, Bolton Wanderers, Burnley, Derby County, Everton, Notts County, Preston North End, Stoke (as they were known at the time), West Bromwich Albion and Wolverhampton Wanderers.
- 5. Communities are organised in different ways—This occurs when communities based on the cultures, religions, and other experiences of their members intervene in various societal issues. For example, while the African American church played an important role in promoting health education and social justice for local communities, not all faith institutions such as the mosque or Buddhist temple are organised and operate in the same way (Chavis & Lee, 2015).

The concept of community has been discussed by scholars with regard to sense of community and postmodern individualism. McMillan and Chavis (1986) proposed four criteria for defining a sense of community: 1) the definition needs to be explicit and clear; 2) it should be concrete, and its parts identifiable; 3) it needs to represent the warmth and intimacy implicit in the term; and 4) it needs to provide a dynamic description of the development and maintenance of the experience. They asserted that a sense of community is defined by four elements (see table 7). Based on the elements illustrated in table 7, McMillan and Chavis (1986) thus defined a sense of community as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (p. 9). This definition suggests that among factors

that created a sense of community, members needed to experience the following two elements: 1) feel a sense of belonging; and 2) share an emotional connection with others.

Tal	Table 7: Elements of a sense of community			
	Elements	Description		
1.	Membership	The feeling of belonging or of sharing a sense of personal relatedness.		
2.	Influence	A sense of mattering, of making a difference to a group and of the group mattering to its members		
3.	Reinforcement	Integration and fulfilment of needs. This is the feeling that members' needs will be met by the resources received through their membership in the group.		
4.				
	Adapted from McMillan and Chavis (1986)			

In relation to community, these elements were juxta positioned in a debate between individualism and tribalism. Cova (1997) drew attention to a crucial deliberation between postmodern individualism and tribalism. In his study on community and consumption, he asserts three key points:

- The postmodern individual, free from the restricting constraints of communities, was restored to themselves and could become fully autonomous. In postmodernity, it became difficult to escape the subjugation of self, and everyone, wherever they come from, was forced to gain the feat of becoming someone by showing their difference. In addition, the right to unlimited freedom in theory—but limited in modernity to the economic, political, and intellectual field—was affecting all aspects of daily life (Cova, 1997). Yankelovich (1998) notes that in the preceding decades as per that period of time (60s, 70s and 80s), a belief in individualism (expressive individualism) took place and was evolving.
- ii Post modern individualism was enabled and nurtured by the developments of industry and commerce in that products and services have progressively freed the individual of all isolating tasks left behind by tradition. For example, consumers could purchase goods from their own home, and without the necessity of physical social contact (distance-purchasing) (Cova, 1997). According Tuttle (2014) in 1994, approximately 98 million consumers made

- \$60 billion worth of purchases from home, almost all of it through telephone orders encouraged by mail catalogues and TV shopping channels.
- iii Given the rise of postmodern individualism, there was still a need for social links in the form of tribes. Yankelovich (1998) asserts that there was a major shift in the conception of what individualism meant, and a great emphasis on cooperation, community and society. Cova et al. (2007) notes that a crucial new perspective emerged that rejected the individualistic view and focused on the reality that human life was fundamentally social, and that who we are is an inherently social phenomenon. They draw attention to tribus, the many small groups we belong to, that are central to our experience of life. In this vein, tribes were the re-emergence of quasi-archaic values such as a local sense of identification, religiosity, syncretism, and group narcissism. Tribus attempted to revive the community archetype of the village or the district, but they were not communities which are clearly definable in spatial terms. Some of these tribes evolved to online communities.

2.3.2. Online communities

Collins and Berge (2008) define an online community as a community of people sharing common interests, ideas, and feelings over the Internet or other collaborative networks. Kazmer (2009) refers to the online community as a collective of individuals who engage in mutually-supportive activities using information and communication technologies such as the Web. They may be located in the same place or not, but they communicate primarily electronically. Roy (2009) defines an online community as a group of individuals with common interests who interact with one another on the Internet. He notes that the online community, is synonymous with the virtual community.

In this vein, Yang and Richardson (2009) define an online community as a virtual community whose members are connected by technology, specifically the web or Internet. In addition, DiPerna (2009) asserts that an online community also known as a virtual community, is a group of people communicating with each other by means of information technologies, typically the Internet, rather than face to face. Zou and Park (2015) define an online community as a community that exists online, mainly on the Internet, where its members with similar interests, experience, or shared values

and take part in social interactions such as sharing information, knowledge, and experience with other members. More recently, Palazzo (2019) refers to online community as a group of people with shared interests, and who use the Internet tools (e.g., blogs, websites, and email) to communicate, create something together, and pursue common interests over time. In light of online communities being referred to as virtual communities, Rheingold (2023) defines virtual community as a group of people, who may or may not meet one another face to face, who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of digital networks. In addition, he draws attention to an article he wrote in 1993 titled 'The Virtual Community' where he referred to virtual communities as "Social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (para 3). In a similar vein, Miguel (2021) notes that when individuals that share common interests interact on social media, they become virtual communities.

Virtual communities have been discussed in terms of their post-placeness. Bradshaw (2008) asserts that virtual communities share a common culture, thus, place has become irrelevant as interpersonal relations, status, and symbols get transplanted, adapted, and reshaped. This is not alienating cultural homogenisation, but it is community-building at a global scale. In this light, Aoki (1994) notes that virtual communities created non-place communities of common interests, affinity, and association. They existed in the global internet and USENET (User's Network) computer networks, commercial videotex systems, and personal computer bulletin boards.

Online communities have been discussed in the school of tribal marketing. According to Baird (2018) tribal marketing is centred on the notion that tribes arise when consumers identify as a group based on common collective behaviour rather than on demographics. In this vein, Kozinets (2021) refers to online communities as consumer tribes. He explains that these consumer tribes are not limited to fan clubs, conventions, in-store and in-home meetings, by any means. They extend themselves into virtual spaces through the use of internet mediated technology. He adds that they have a structure and followers and are increasingly mediated by technology. Thus, their communication expresses information and emotion through pictures and words. Cova (1997) notes that when consumer tribes used all the resources linked to technical

means of communication (micro-computers, minitels, fax) to communicate, they became virtual tribes in which face-to-face encounters or co-physical presence were not compulsory. Oliveira (2019) defines virtual tribes as social aggregations established in cyberspace, whose crucial components are the appearance, the image, and feelings of affection and emotion.

Online communities have also been discussed in relation to fandom. Allison (2020) defines fandom as a community of fans located in both online and offline spaces. Yeromin (2021) refers to fandom as a subculture composed of fans, which is characterised by a feeling of empathy and camaraderie with others who share a mutual interest, usually a media franchise of some sort. Burton (2020) defines fandom as a community of fans that like the same celebrity, writer, movie, television show, musician, artist, etc. Kozinets (2010) asserts that the Internet and its connectivity has been instrumental in creating brand fandom, where consumers are turned into fans. Before the internet, fans met at fan clubs, attended conventions and wrote newsletters, fanzines, and add-on circuit newsletters called APAs. This pre-internet era can be seen as fandom 1.0. What followed was fandom 2.0. Kozinets (2010) states that in fandom 2.0, "because information and communications technologies, more people of more ages from more places around the world are able to participate in more ways, in more fan communities than ever before" (p. 18). In football fandom, football fans should not be viewed as consumers or vice-versa. At its core, the relationship between a fan and their club is based on a sense of attachment that transcends consumerism no matter how many replica shirts they purchase. It is not a relationship that can be bought or sold (New Citizen Project, 2021).

Lazar and Preece (1998) proposed the following key characteristics for classifying online communities (see table 8): 1) their attributes; 2) supporting software; 3) their relationship to physical communities; and 4) the sociological concept of boundedness.

Tal	Table 8: Key characteristics of online communities			
	Key characteristics Description			
1.	Attributes	A shared goal or interest that provides the reason for being a part of the community. Intense interactions and strong emotional ties. Shared activities between community members. Access to shared resources. Support between community members.		

2.	Supporting software	An online community can be classified by the software (technology) that supports it. Many communities (at the time) were supported using a list server, newsgroup, bulletin board, Internet Relay Chat (IRC), or Multi-User Dungeon (MUD).	
3.	Relationship to physical communities	Online communities can be based on physical communities (geographically focused), somewhat based in physical communities (members have periodic face to face meetings), and not related to any physical communities (usually have no face to face meetings) (Aoki, 1994).	
4.	Boundness	The design, or the community members' actions, may determine the level of boundedness. Companies or organisations may decide that their online communities should be limited to people who work for that company, who live in a specific geographic area, or who are part of a specific population. By design, a computer network may be an intranet which is not connected to the Internet or to other outside networks.	
	Adapted from Lazar and Preece (1998)		

Based on the above discussion on online communities, this study proposes that an online community is a group of individuals who share common interests and emotional bonds, and interact with each other on a face-to-face basis and/or through internet mediated technologies. Various types of online communities are highlighted in table 9.

Tal	Table 9: Types of online communities			
	Туре	Example	Description	
1.	Online religious communities	Catholic Answers - Facebook	This is an online community for Catholics and curious non-Catholics and invites individuals to ask and explore questions about the Catholic Church. Their aim is to develop personal studies about the Catholic Church (Catholic Answers, 2021).	
2.	Online scholarly communities	Netnographers - X	This online community invites netnographers to network, discuss and build communities and cultures centred on netnography (Netnographers, 2022).	
3.	Online political communities	Young Democrats of America - LinkedIn	This online community rallies young people under the age of 36 to participate in the electoral process, promotes Democratic Party principles, and develops young people's skills so that they can serve as leaders at both a local	

			and national level (Young Democrats of America, 2008).
4.	Online music communities	Roots, Reggae and Rastafari Culture - Facebook	This is an online community dedicated to discussing reggae music. Members of this community are urged to respect the Rastafari way of life and its influence on music and the world (Roots Reggae and Rastafari Culture, 2016).
5.	Online beverage communities	Speciality Coffee UK - Facebook	This online community is devoted to individuals who enjoy:1) trying to draw the best out of coffee; 2) brewing different types of coffee such as espressos; 3) using coffee devices such as the AeroPress, Drip and Chemex; and 4) recommend coffee shops to one another (Speciality Coffee UK, 2017).
6.	Online brand communities	Adidas Original Group - Facebook	This is a private online community dedicated to Adidas Original sneakers and apparel enthusiasts (Adidas Originals Group, 2020).

In the case of online brand communities such as the Adidas Original Group in table 9, a key shared interest that brings members of an online community together is a brand.

2.3.3. Brands

Branding in its earliest form dates to 2000 BC and was used to show ownership. For example, farmers would brand their cattle to distinguish them from other livestock, and craftsmen would embed symbols onto their products to signify their origin. As years have progressed, branding has become a way for organisations to market themselves and create a bond of trust with consumers (O'Neill, 2015). Keller (2016) notes that branding entails creating differentiation in the minds of consumers and evading commoditisation of goods and services. In this vein, a brand is defined by Sammut-Bonnici (2015) as "a set of tangible and intangible attributes designed to create awareness and identity, and to build the reputation of a product, service, person, place, or organisation" (p. 1). Maurya and Mishra (2012) assert the following points about brands: 1) Brands are conditional, intangible and legal assets for a firm; and 2) Brands are a signal of perceived value to all the stakeholders. Marion (2022) explains that a brand is the idea or image consumers have in their mind when thinking about specific products, services, and activities of a company, in both a practical and

emotional way. She adds that this combination of practical and emotional cues occurs when consumers are exposed to the name, logo and visual identity of a brand. In a study titled 'A solution to the problem of brand definition,' Avis and Henderson (2022) critically evaluated the definition of the brand concept with empirical research using a sample of 730 journal papers to analyse the scope and number of brand related concepts in extant literature. Accordingly, they define a brand as "a trade name/logo that identifies a product or firm, usage of which may be limited by legal structures and practice" (p. 366). The American Marketing Association (2023) defines a brand as "a name, term, design, symbol or any other feature that identifies one seller's goods or services as distinct from those of other sellers" (para 1). This study adopts the aforementioned definition of a brand.

In this vein, a sport brand is described by a name, design, symbol, or any combination that a sport organisation or individual athlete uses to help differentiate its products from competition (Aaker, 1991). In the same way, a football club brand is described by its logo, name, brand values, culture (stories, rituals and routines, symbols, organisational structure, control systems, and power structures), personality, positioning, franchises, and any experience that maintains fan followership (Bridgewater, 2010; Fenton, 2018). On the aspect of rituals, a study on digital rituals by Disney Advertising (2021) found that digital sports rituals and traditional sports viewing are simultaneously trending. Examples of brands in the context of their industries are highlighted in table 10.

Ta	Table 10: Types of brands			
	Brand-Type-Industry	Description		
1.	Brand: Adidas Type: Product brand Industry: Sportswear	Adidas, in full Adidas AG, is a German manufacturer of athletic shoes, apparel and sporting goods. In the early 21st century it was the largest sportswear manufacturer in Europe and the second largest (after Nike) in the world. Adidas products are traditionally marked with a threestripe trademark, which remains an element in the company's logos (Lewis, 2023).		
2.	Brand: Samsung Type: Product brand Industry: Electronics	Samsung, a South Korean company, is one of the world's largest producers of electronic devices. It specialises in the production of a wide variety of consumer and industry electronics, including appliances, digital media devices, semiconductors, memory chips, and integrated systems. It has become one of the most-recognisable names in		

		technology and produces about a fifth of South Korea's total exports (Bondarenko, 2023).
3.	Brand: Starbucks Type: Product/service brand Industry: Coffeehouse	Starbucks, an American company, is the largest coffeehouse chain and one of the most recognisable brands in the world (Petruzzello & Bondarenko, 2023).
4.	Brand: Liverpool Type: Product/service brand Industry: Sports	Liverpool is an English professional football club based in Liverpool. It is the most successful English team in European football tournament history, having won six European Cup/Champions League trophies (Gifford, 2023).
5.	Brand: Sydney Mclaughlin- Levrone Type: Personal brand Industry: Sports	Sydney Mclaughlin-Levrone is an American short-distance hurdles/flat track athlete ranked eighth in the women's world category. She is a four-time Olympic champion and three-time world champion among other elite accomplishments (World Athletics, 2024).
6.	Brand: Emirates Airline Type: Service brand Industry: Airline	Established in Oct-1985, Emirates Airline is the national carrier of the emirate of Dubai, United Arab Emirates. The airline operates with a fleet of widebody equipment and is the largest operator of the Airbus A380 aircraft type. Emirates provides an extensive network of services within the Middle East as well as to Africa, Asia, the South Pacific, North America, Europe, and South America (CAPA, 2023).

The advent of social media has enabled brands to exist in online brand communities within social media platforms.

2.3.4. Social media

To understand how social media has enabled brands to exist within social media platforms, it is vital to acknowledge the significance of Web 2.0 and thus discuss what social media is. Initially, for Web 2.0 to exist, it transitioned from Web 1.0. Table 11 illustrates the key differences between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0.

Tal	Table 11: Key differences between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0			
	Web 1.0	Web 2.0		
1.	Time Burnes-Lee referred to Web 1.0 as 'read only' in 1989. Users were able to search for information on the Internet but only read it on a website. The role of a user was limited to reading information provided by the content producers.	Tim O'Reilly coined the term in 2004 where 'the web as the platform', emphasising the participatory aspect of the web as opposed to the web as an information-source model.		

2.	The role of a website was passive in nature. Consumers could exchange information through messages but could not interact with a website.	The role of a website was collaborative in nature. Users could participate and collaborate in the distribution of information on a website.		
3.	The website creator or host was solely responsible for updating and managing content on a website.	The website creator and users could both read and write on a website making interaction bi-directional.		
4.	Web 1.0 concepts led to the development of web sites and personal sites.	Web 2.0 concepts have led to the development and evolution of web culture communities and hosted services such as social-networking sites, video sharing sites, wikis, blogs, and folksonomies.		
	Adapted from: (Choudhury, 2014; New World Encyclopedia, 2023; Madurai, 2018)			

In the transition from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) add that in the Web 1.0 era, applications such as personal web pages, Encyclopedia Britannica Online, and the idea of content publishing existed. They were then replaced by blogs, wikis, and collaborative projects in the Web 2.0 era. According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), Web 2.0 is a term that was first used in 2004 to define a new way in which software developers and users began to use the World Wide Web—that is, as a platform whereby content and applications are no longer created and published by individuals, but instead are continuously improved by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion. In this light, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow for the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (p. 61). In addition, they propose six types of social media:

- i Collaborative projects—These projects enable the joint and simultaneous creation of content by many end-users and are, in this sense, the most democratic manifestation of UGC. Examples of collaborative projects are wikis, which are websites that allow users to add, remove, and change text-based content and social bookmarking applications that enable the group-based collection and rating of internet links or media content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).
- **Blogs**—These are the social media equivalent of personal web pages and can come in a multitude of different variations, from personal diaries describing the author's life to summaries of all relevant information in one specific

- content area. Blogs are usually managed by one person only, but provide the possibility of interaction with others through the addition of comments (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).
- iii Content communities—These are social media groups dedicated to sharing media content between users. Content communities exist for a wide range of different media types, including text (e.g. Bookcrossing, through which 750,000+ people from over 130 countries share books), photos (e.g. Flickr), videos (e.g. YouTube), and PowerPoint presentations (e.g. SlideShare). Users on content communities are not required to create a personal profile page. If they do, these pages usually only contain basic information, such as the date they joined the community and the number of videos shared (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).
- iv Social Networking sites—These are applications that enable users to connect by creating personal information profiles, inviting friends and colleagues to have access to those profiles, and sending emails and instant messages between each other. These personal profiles can include any type of information, including photos, video, audio files, and blogs (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Boyd and Ellison (2007) define social network sites as web-based services that enable individuals to: 1) create a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system; 2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection with; and 3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. They add that the nature and nomenclature of these connections may differ from site to site.
- v Virtual game worlds—These are platforms that replicate a three-dimensional environment in which users can appear in the form of personalised avatars and interact with each other as they would in real life. In this sense, virtual worlds are probably the ultimate manifestation of social media, as they provide the highest level of social presence and media richness of all applications discussed thus far (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).
- vi Virtual social worlds—These platforms allow inhabitants to choose their behaviour more freely and essentially live a virtual life like their real life. As in virtual game worlds, virtual social world users appear in the form of avatars and interact in a three-dimensional virtual environment. However, in this

realm, there are no rules restricting the range of possible interactions, except for basic physical laws such as gravity (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Table 12 outlines examples of social media platforms in relation to the types of social media mentioned above.

Table 12: Examples of social media platforms and their type					
	Туре	Social media platform	Description		
1.	Collaborative Project	Wikipedia	Wikipedia is an open-source and openly edited online encyclopaedia created in 2001. It is a multilingual, openly collaborative online information platform. Its content is editable by volunteers from across the globe (Still, 2020).		
2.	Blog	WordPress	WordPress is open-source software used to create websites, blogs, or applications (WordPress, 2023).		
3.	Content community	YouTube	YouTube is a social media platform used for: 1) watching and uploading video content to its website; and 2) interacting with users through likes, comments, or shares. It has belonged to Google since 2006 (Romero, 2019).		
4.	Social networking site	Facebook	Launched in 2004, Facebook is a social networking website where users can post comments, share photographs, and post links to news or other interesting content on the web, chat live, and watch shortform videos (Nations, 2021).		
5.	Virtual game world	Minecraft	Minecraft is an action and adventure virtual game that offers its players an opportunity to explore a limitless virtual world (Bitner, 2021).		
6.	Virtual social world	Metaverse	The metaverse is a network of shared, immersive virtual worlds where people can connect with friends, create games, play games, work and shop (Koss, 2022).		

In a study titled 'Web 2.0: A Definition, Literature Review, and Directions for Future Research,' Wilson et al. (2011) employ a different approach to show how social media platforms/social networking sites are part of Web 2.0 technologies. They define Web 2.0 as the second generation of the Web, wherein compatible, user-centred web applications and services are used to promote social connectedness, media and information sharing, user-created content, and collaboration among individuals and

organisations. In this vein, user-centred web applications are designed with a focus on users and their needs in each stage of the design process (The Interaction Design Foundation, 2023). According to Wilson et al. (2011), these web applications include:

1) Mashups—the 'mashing' together of two or more Web services or applications; 2) Information sharing sites—sites whose primary purpose is the sharing of information or media, from videos to photos to articles to bookmarks/links; 3) Social networking—online social networks help users keep in contact and receive updates from their friends, family, and colleagues; 4) Syndication—a service that tracks updates to various sites on the Web, aggregating the various 'feeds' for later consumption; 5) Weblogs (blogs)—a personal Web page or diary, easily updated and generally displayed in reverse chronological order; and 6) Wikis—a website that anyone can edit.

In their study titled 'Social Media: Defining, Developing, and Divining' Carr and Hayes (2015) draw on extant definitions of social media and subcategories (e.g. social network sites) from public relations, information technology, and management scholarship, as well as the popular press, to develop a definition of social media, which according to them is accurate enough to embody these technologies yet robust enough to remain applicable in 2035. Thus, Carr and Hayes (2015) define the term social media as: "Internet-based, dis-entrained, and persistent channels of mass personal communication facilitating perceptions of interactions among users, deriving value primarily from user-generated content" (p. 49). This definition is conceptualised using four elements as illustrated in table 13:

Table 13: Social media elements				
	Social media element	Description		
1.	Internet-based	These are online tools operating through the broader Internet, which refers to the interconnected computer networks across the globe and predominantly to the system infrastructure. For example, the World Wide Web is one of many applications using the Internet's infrastructure. Other Internet based applications include: Web 2.0 technologies such as Facebook and Instagram; and intranets such as IBM's beehive.		
2.	Dis-entrained, persistent channels	Social media platforms that facilitate communication among users at the same time. These include face-to-face interactions or real-time text or video chats such as instant messenger or Skype interactions.		

3.	Perceived interactivity	The use of social media platforms entails perceived interactive engagement with others. In this case, users perceive they are interacting with others, even if the sending and receiving of messages does not meet the criteria typically associated with interaction.		
4.	User-generated value	The use of social media platforms enables contributions from or interactions with other users rather than content generated by organisations or individuals hosting the medium. The interaction with other users is the motivation for the continual involvement with the content. From a strategic marketing standpoint, Li et al. (2021) contend that communication on social media platforms involves a process that enables both organisations and consumers to exchange resources. Thus both parties are able to generate value from communicating with each other on social media platforms.		
5.	Mass personal communication	Social media platforms are used for interpersonal communication. For instance, social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and X have been identified as ideal venues for mass personal communication. This is because they allow individuals to broadcast messages to a large audience.		
Adapted from Carr and Hayes (2015)				

In light of the above discussions on Web 2.0, social media definitions, social media platforms and various types of social media, Bajpai et al. (2012) note that social media platforms are readily available due to internet access, and are relatively inexpensive. Thus, organisations use social media platforms to increase communication, to nurture brand awareness and improve customer service. In this vein, various scholars note that social media platforms provide an avenue for marketing. Kocoglu et al. (2020) acknowledge that social media is a significant marketing avenue for brands. As such brands are using social media platforms to influence user's brand preferences.

2.3.5. Social media marketing

According to Prasad and Saigal (2019), social media marketing is defined as designing content that consumers can share amongst each other with the aim of helping a company expand its customer base and increase brand visibility. Li et al. (2021) define social media marketing as "an organisation's integrated pattern of activities that are based on a careful assessment of customers' motivations for brand-related social media use and the undertaking of deliberate engagement initiatives, to transform social media connectedness (networks) and interactions (influences) into valuable strategic

means to achieve desirable marketing outcomes" (p. 54). In this context, social media marketing consists of four interlocking parts, namely: 1) drivers—the firm's social media marketing objectives and the customers' social media use motivations; 2) inputs—the firm's social media engagement initiatives and the customers' social media behaviours; 3) throughputs—the way the firm connects and interacts with customers to exchange resources and satisfy needs; and 4) outputs—the resulting customer engagement outcomes.

2.3.5.1. Social media marketing strategies

Li et al. (2021) identify four distinct social media marketing strategies, representing increasing levels of strategic maturity: 1) Social commerce strategy; 2) Social content strategy; 3) Social monitoring strategy; and 4) Customer relationship management strategy. In this sense, organisations in the sports industry are using social media for marketing purposes in various ways:

- As a social commerce strategy, social media is used as a selling, promotional, and advertising platform that has a positive impact on customer purchase intentions and financial performance. Moreover, the interactive-ness, informativeness, entertainment, and credibility of social media advertising positively affects customer behaviour and purchase intention (Li et al., 2021). For instance, Arsenal and Adidas (Arsenal's official sportswear sponsor) often use social media platforms to advertise branded merchandise in the form of vintage fashion collections and various innovative sportswear designs (Arsenal, 2022).
- As a social content strategy, social media is used to showcase brands in the context of: 1) functional and emotional appeals; 2) vividness, and interactivity; 3) inspirational knowledge; and 4) trending topics (Li et al., 2021). For instance, the Arsenal and Adidas 'no more red' campaign ignited a social initiative to raise awareness about the alarming teenage life expectancy in some areas in London. It involved a series of YouTube documentaries based on empowering young people and creating an exclusive all white Arsenal home jersey that was not for sale but for a selected group of individuals who made a positive impact around Islington, North London (Arsenal, 2022).

- iii Social monitoring strategy stresses the importance of social listening and responding to customer needs. It entails the use of social media as a 'listening tool' to observe and analyse customers. It is also a strategy whereby firms adopt different techniques to analyse social media data (Li et al., 2021). For instance, LA FC, an American top tier football/soccer club uses Zoomph, a digital analytics software to classify social media content, analyse 'photo versus video' content, examine content by subject matter, measure sponsored/non-sponsored content, view content by different timing related to matchdays, and test new ideas for content creation (Bassam, 2020).
- iv Within a customer relationship management strategy, customer engagement and social customer relationship marketing capabilities positively affect a brand's competitive advantage and performance. In addition, customer resource integration, customer knowledge sharing, and learning are the key foundational customer engagement processes (Li et al., 2021). For instance, Leicester City, a top tier football club in England, uses Microsoft Dynamics to create profiles of all its supporters based on ticket and retail purchase history, demographic information, match attendance and website signups. This helps the club build detailed fan profiles, send customised messages or promotions to targeted groups of fans, increase ticket sales, gain support from sponsors and keep fans engaged (Scott, 2018).

The discussion on social media marketing suggests that both brands and consumers exist within social media platforms. Thus, organisations use various social media marketing strategies to promote their brands and build relationships with consumers. In this context, organisations are fostering relationships with consumers through brand communities. Armstrong et al. (2016) asserts that the coexistence between brand and consumer provides organisations an opportunity to encourage relationship development and brand community.

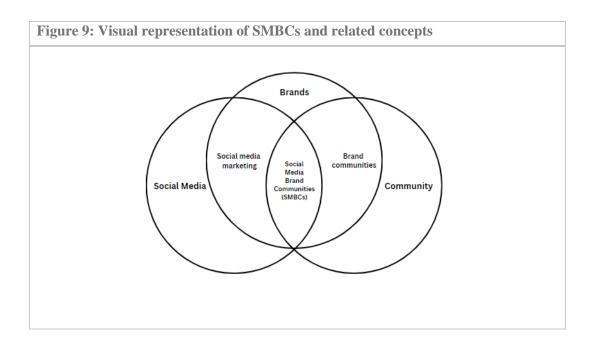
2.3.5.2. Importance of social media for marketing

Chanthinok et al. (2015) assert that organisations have been using social media platforms for social media marketing in their marketing strategies. Additionally, Soegoto and Utomo (2019) note that social media is one of the most suitable platforms for marketing communications. Their study on marketing strategies through social

media found that marketing communication using social media influences consumer interest in buying goods offered through social media platforms. In their netnography of Jeep and Harley Davidson Facebook groups, Habibi et al. (2014) note that social media communities are ideal for developing, negotiating and sharing brand content meaning and values on social media. Brogi (2014) notes that the emergence of Web 2.0 has led to increased participation of members on SMBCs. In a similar vein, Kumar (2021) postulate that Web 2.0-based technologies such as social media allow for the creation, collaboration and exchange of brand information and values. Checchinato et al. (2015) highlight the importance of Web 2.0 tools in consumer brand engagement. In their study, they note that firms use Web 2.0 tools to generate and share brand content thus transforming the interaction between companies and their clients. Thompson et al. (2018) recommend that as the popularity of social media increases, sports brands must formulate specific strategies to use social media sites to enhance fan loyalty and build brand equity. Still, Sundaram et al. (2020) indicate that firms have been unable to exploit social media marketing to its full potential and their understanding of this marketing strategy for branding purposes is limited.

2.3.6. Visual representation of SMBCs

In light of the literature discussed on SMBCs and its related concepts which are: community, brands, social media and social media marketing, this study proposes a visual representation depicted in figure 9. To this end, figure 9 is a visually inspired illustration that showcases how SMBCs' related concepts are interlinked. It can also be used as a visual aid in the comprehension of SMBCs and its related concepts. Based on figure 9, the following three points are noted: 1) social media marketing occurs when organisations use social media to market their brands to consumers; 2) brand communities exist when a shared interest in a brand brings consumers together; and 3) SMBCs are formed when brand communities use social media to enhance engagement between members, and when organisations use social media to develop communities centred on a shared interest in their brand.



2.4. Brand engagement and official and user SMBCs

To understand customer brand engagement within sport SMBCs, it is essential to draw attention to different types of SMBCs that share brand content. These include official and user SMBCs. This section thus discusses an overview of official and user SMBCs in relation to their definition, evolution, features and content. The section then focuses on brand engagement in official SMBCs in relation to fan engagement, marketing strategies and brand value. In addition, the section presents literature on brand engagement in user SMBCs in relation to fan engagement, marketing strategies and threats to brand equity. The section then presents a summarised comparison of official and user SMBCs.

2.4.1. Brand engagement

The engagement of customers with brands has been described as customer brand engagement. Based on findings from a marketing literature review on customer brand engagement, Hollebeek (2011) defined customer brand engagement as "the level of an individual customer's motivational, brand-related, and context-dependent state of mind characterised by specific levels of cognitive, emotional and behavioural activity in direct brand interactions" (p. 786). More recently, Obilo et al. (2021) define customer brand engagement as "Consumers' positive and negative behavioural interactions with a brand and all its constituent elements (brand content, other

consumers, etc.), beyond simple transactions, that result from their interest in and commitment to the brand" (p. 126). McDonald et al. (2022) assert that customer brand engagement develops from communication with the focal actor and is a consumer's contribution not only to value creation in brand communities, but also to tasks related to stakeholders' concerns. In sport, they note that customer brand engagement, the process, and its merits, clarifies why some teams still maintain fan bases despite unsuccessful on-field performances.

According to Brodie et al. (2011) there are five dimensions for customer engagement:

1) it is a psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, co-creative customer experiences with a focal agent/object (e.g. a brand) in focal service relationships; 2) it occurs under a specific set of context-dependent conditions generating differing customer engagement levels; 3) it exists as a dynamic, iterative process within service relationships that co-create value; 4) it plays a central role in a nomological network governing service relationships in which other relational concepts (e.g. involvement, loyalty) are antecedents and/or consequences in iterative customer engagement processes; and 5) it is a multidimensional concept subject to a context-and/or stakeholder-specific expression of relevant cognitive, emotional and/or behavioural dimensions.

2.4.2. Official and user SMBCs

Official SMBCs are created by firms to share brand-related FGC with consumers on social media. They produce and share FGC that is professionally designed and managed by a firm's marketing department and have become a popular tool, enabling brands to use various content types to show consumers sharable, informative, and comment-worthy information (Colicev et al., 2019; Santiago et al., 2022). In contrast, user SMBCs are created by consumers to share brand-related UGC with fellow consumers on social media (Krumm et al., 2008; Santos, 2022). According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), UGC is the sum of all ways in which people utilise social media. The term, which achieved broad popularity in 2005, is often applied to describe the various forms of media content that are publicly available and created by end-users. This includes texts, data, information, and media that is showcased to others in a useful or entertaining way. This content is captured and streamed over social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, TikTok etc. (Krumm et al., 2008; Santos, 2022; Tu et al.,

2021). Graham and Wunsch-Vincent (2007) assert that UGC needs to fulfil three basic requirements in order to be considered as such: 1) it needs to be published either on a publicly accessible website or on a social networking site accessible to a selected group of people; 2) it needs to show a certain amount of creative effort; and 3) it needs to have been created outside of professional routines and practices.

In sport, user SMBCs are referred to as prosumer sport 2.0 by Andrews and Ritzer (2018). For them, social media sport prosumption embodies the largely independent and unpaid process through which fans produce and consume social media content that shapes, however minutely, the meanings circulating within the sporting universe. They allude to this as a form of 'de-McDonaldizing' sport whereby fans are using social media to produce content that is different from what they consume on mainstream media platforms.

2.4.3. Evolution of official and user SMBCs

Official and user SMBCs have evolved in conjunction with digital marketing. Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2015) define digital marketing as, "the application of the Internet and related digital technologies in conjunction with traditional communications to achieve marketing objectives" (p. 11). According to Kim et al. (2021), digital marketing is at the forefront of the technological revolution as it is leading the way in offering new features to reach, inform, engage, offer, and sell products and services to customers. Busca and Bertrandias (2020) have identified four eras of digital marketing that can be linked to the evolution of official and user SMBCs. These include the collaborative systems era, the traditional market systems era, the co-creative systems era, and the prosumption systems era (see table 114).

Table 14: Evolution of official and user SMBCs				
	Digital marketing era	Activity		
1.	Collaborative systems era (1969 - 1979)	The collaborative development of networks such as ARPAnet and Usenet by computer scientists; they were used for scientific and not marketing purposes. Kozinets (2020) asserts that these networks were crucial developments that aided the establishment of social media, which according to Bala and Verma (2018), is currently used as a tool for digital marketing.		

2.	Traditional market systems era (1980 - 1994)	Firms began to use networks for marketing purposes. For example, Smith (2018) notes that firms used 'banner ads' for advertising through websites such as hotwired.com. Here, firms had more control over the networks than the consumer.		
3.	Co-creative systems era (1995 - 1999)	Firms incorporated users into production of content through official virtual communities. For example, in a co-creative effort, Amazon created virtual communities to enable customers to rate and review books and other products (Kozinets, 2020). Additionally, eBay also known as Auction.com in 1995 was developed as a virtual community geared towards the buying and selling of goods (Tarnoff, 2022).		
4.	Prosumption systems era (2000 - 2020s)	Both consumers and firms could make similar marketing decisions because they had access to the same social media marketing networks. This then spurred the emergence of user SMBCs comprising of prosumers—consumers who produce marketing content for fellow consumers.		
	Adapted from Busca and Bertrandias (2020)			

There are two interrelated points that can be understood from table 14: 1) Official SMBCs have a long history and can be traced back to the traditional market systems era (1980 – 1994) of digital marketing; and 2) User SMBCs are a new and emerging phenomenon evolving within the Prosumption systems era (2000 – 2020s) of digital marketing. Various researchers have noted that user SMBCs are emerging as a recent trend and are increasingly gaining recognition. In the context of football, Woods and Ludvigsen (2022) note that the YouTube 'Fan TV' channels "encapsulate one of the most recent trends and the continuation of global and digital forces impacting contemporary fandom in the EPL" (p. 2241). Rivers and Ross (2021) assert that user SMBCs have drawn the attention of mainstream media outlets. They suggest that the YouTube Fan TV channel AFTV is significant within the football media landscape. In a similar vein, Majumdar and Naha (2020) found that sports broadcasters in mainstream media are able to display the global nature of fandom, as fans from around the world become interactive participants in mediatised sport through user SMBCs.

2.4.4. Brand engagement in official SMBCs

Brand engagement in official SMBCs is discussed in the context of fan engagement, marketing strategies and brand value.

2.4.4.1. Fan engagement

FGC showcased on official SMBCs is used for fan engagement. According to Nisar et al. (2018), in Europe, football clubs can use FGC on social media to increase brand engagement with fans and attract spectators. In a similar vein, Meire et al. (2019) found that football clubs use FGC to influence customer brand engagement when a team is on-field and off-field. In addition, emotional FGC is used to improve customer sentiment after unfavourable event outcomes. Likewise, Borges (2018) found that emotional FGC is used by football clubs to bolster fans' emotional and mediated connection with the brand thus developing a strong global community. An example of emotional content cited includes intimate moments of players through their personal lives or sharing behind the scenes footage. Similarly, Machado et al. (2020) note that emotional and hedonic FGC is used to stimulate fans to express themselves through brand association, while enabling fans to escape from their daily routines, relax, and feel amusement and enjoyment.

2.4.4.2. Official SMBCs and marketing strategies

Various researchers have described the marketing strategies used to share brandrelated content within official SMBCs. Such strategies include: 1) fan contest participation and activities (Machado et al, 2020); 2) adaptation of brand content to consumer ethnicity through language adaptation, identity elements and identity matching (Villegas & Marin, 2022); 3) functional, emotional, relational and entitativity (unity and coherence) value-based activities (Carlson et al., 2019); 4) product, branding, networking and dynamization (active engagement) activities (Salmi et al., 2019); 5) use of event-related FGC hashtags as a form of social ambushing or news jacking (Burton & McClean, 2021); and 6) incorporating fans' ideas and phrases as brand slogans (Huang et al., 2022), a case in point is Liverpool's integration of 'You'll never walk alone' into their stadium, crest and club merchandise (see figure 10). The slogan 'You never walk alone,' which is also on the current Liverpool crest, dates back to the 1960s. It is based on a song that was released by Gerry and the Peacemakers in 1963 and adopted by Liverpool around the same time. Bill Shankly (Shanks) who was the team manager at the time, was presented with a copy of the song and was immensely impressed. He later on selected the song during an appearance on BBC's Desert Island Discs radio show in 1965. From then on, the

song 'You'll never walk alone' became an instant phenomenon among Liverpool fans and is sung before every home game begins, thus becoming a fan ritual (Chun et al., 2004; Platt, 2023).

Figure 10: Liverpool's 'You'll Never Walk Alone' slogan



Sources: (Delaney, 2020; Murphy, 2017)

2.4.4.3. Brand value

Several scholars concur that brand engagement within official SMBCs has an impact on brand value. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) note that brand community affects brand equity. From their study on the impact of social value, content value and brand equity in SMBCs, Faisal et al. (2022) also found that brand engagement within official SMBCs has a positive impact on brand equity. Similarly, Cheung et al. (2020) in their study on exploring synergetic effects of social-media communication and distribution strategy on consumer-based brand equity, found that firm created social-media brand communication and distribution intensity are key factors influencing consumer-based brand equity. Likewise, Kumar (2021), in a study on customer brand engagement in Facebook brand communities, found that there exists a link between brand community engagement and brand equity.

Other scholars have found a relationship between brand engagement within official SMBCs and various dimensions of brand value as follows:

Purchase intention—A positive relationship has been identified between brand engagement within official SMBCs and purchase intention by some scholars. Chen and Huang (2020) found a positive association between consumer engagement in official online brand communities on purchase

intention of cosmetic products. In a sports related study, Dias et al. (2022) found that commitment between supporters and their clubs on SMBCs has a positive influence on their relationship in terms of purchase and reference intention. They suggest that this can be enhanced by suitable social media content, which can result in fans identifying with the club and feeling closer to the club. Similarly, Heerden and Wiese (2021) show that purchase intention is a strong outcome of brand engagement within official Facebook brand communities. Likewise, Chang and Hsu (2022) show that online brand community engagement are key predictors of virtual item purchase intention, licensed product purchase intention and co-branded product purchase intention regarding a gaming brand. Trivedi et al. (2021) also found that brand engagement within fans' online community engagement resulted in game attendance and sponsor's product purchase intention.

i Brand loyalty—Brand loyalty has been linked to brand engagement within official SMBCs by various scholars in the field of sport. In their study on transnational digital fandom, McGillivray and McLaughlin (2018) note that there exists an important connection between overseas fans within official SMBCs in football and brand loyalty. In this context, SMBCs can enable greater audience reach, providing a chance for commercial gain by creating more fan loyalty and engagement, and fortifying greater 'fan' involvement in the activities of clubs. They however caution that fans can easily switch allegiance if social media content is not delivered to them in a timely manner. In a similar vein, in a study of Super Basketball League (Taiwan's top tier semi-professional men's basketball league), Huang et al., (2022) concluded that brand loyalty was a result of brand engagement benefits within official SMBCs. Such benefits included a sense of membership, and social benefits and perceived interactivity.

In a non-sport related context, various scholars concur that brand engagement within official SMBCs has a positive impact on brand loyalty. Diachi et al. (2021) studied social media fashion brand communities and found that consumer engagement fosters loyalty to SMBCs. Similarly, in a study on antecedents of brand loyalty using brand personality as a moderator in fashion

clothing SMBCs, Sharif et al. (2022) found that SMBCs have a positive impact on brand loyalty.

Santos et al. (2022) found that consumer engagement had a positive effect on brand trust and loyalty in a fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) industry. Chou and Lin (2023) conducted a study on SMBCs in different product and service industries (beauty, food and beverage, clothing and shoes, wholesale and retail, and hospitality and leisure). They found that brand engagement in firm-hosted SMBCs leads to brand loyalty. They further note that engagement and brand loyalty within SMBCs become stronger when brand-specific consumer education, reputation enhancement, interaction support, and entertainment support are enhanced. In a study that focused on the mobile phone industry, Fan et al. (2022) found that customer-to-customer interaction in firm online brand communities had a positive effect on brand loyalty. In their study on why consumers engage in online brand communities in various industries and contexts, Heerden and Wiese (2021) also found that loyalty towards official Facebook brand communities was the strongest outcome of brand engagement. In a study on consumer engagement in firm online brand communities in the cosmetic industry, Chen and Huang (2022) suggest that recognition, community identification and self-efficacy have substantial positive effects on consumer engagement in SMBCs thus improving brand loyalty.

iii Brand engagement relationships—Brand engagement relationships between football clubs and fans is enhanced through official SMBCs. Dias et al. (2022) found that the commitment between the fans and the football club on official SMBCs has a positive influence on the relationship between the two. It thus makes it easier for football clubs to engage a great number of fans with their brand. Similarly, Alonso-Dos-Santos et al. (2018) found that there was a relationship between brand engagement and the relationship quality of official virtual brand communities in the Campeonato Nacional Scotiabank League (Chile's top tier football league). Furthermore, Anaya-Sánchez et al. (2020) note that brand engagement relationships based on trust resulted in consumers recommending the brand to others. In addition, Chang and Hsu (2022) assert

that learning, entertainment and social interaction between the firm and the consumers has a positive effect on online brand community engagement.

In a study on consumer engagement within retail communication channels, and the examination of online brand communities and digital content marketing initiatives, Bowden and Mirzaei (2021) compared official online and offline brand communities. They found that online brand communities play a significant role in enhancing brand engagement relationships when compared to digital content marketing via email. Accordingly, members of online brand communities displayed a greater propensity to engage with brands affectively and cognitively. This meant that they spent more time thinking about the brand and voluntarily learning about it when compared to their non-online brand community counterparts. Their study thus recommends that marketers should leverage online brand communities to enhance the brand experience as consumers identify more closely with brands within online communities.

iv Multiple dimensions of brand value—In the world of sport, Thompson et al. (2018) found that brand engagement within sport SMBCs were used by firms to develop brand loyalty and brand association in the pursuit of long-term marketing goals. In their study on the effect of customer social participation in hotel SMBCs on consumer-based brand equity and advocacy, Abdel-Aty and Deraz (2022) found that there are moderate positive effects of consumer social participation on various brand equity dimensions, namely brand image, brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand association. Bashir et al. (2020), in their study on the impact of brand community participation on brand equity dimensions in the luxury apparel industry, found that participation in online brand communities has a significant impact on three brand equity dimensions namely: brand awareness, brand association, and perceived quality.

2.4.5. Brand engagement in user SMBCs

Brand engagement in user SMBCs is discussed in the context of fan engagement, marketing strategies, and threats to brand equity.

2.4.5.1. Fan engagement

Fan engagement in user SMBCs is entrenched in the autonomy of these communities. In sport, the marginalisation of fans' voices within the dominant mainstream media plays a crucial role in the creation of some football user SMBCs. They are thus viewed as democratic spaces free of firm control where fans can freely deliberate on football club issues on social media (Woods & Ludvigsen, 2022). Andrews and Ritzer (2018) note that the voices of sports fans (individual sports social media prosumers) have often been suppressed by what they call the 'Leviathans' (corporate sports entities) using established brand value within social media settings. Woods and Ludvigsen (2022) assert that Fan TV YouTube channels are highly significant in facilitating football fans to voice their perceptions on club matters, transfer speculations, gameplay, and provide tactical analyses with pre-game and post-game reactions. In addition, user SMBCs afford fans an opportunity to participate in a football club's decision making process such as a manager's team selection, and other facets of club management (Healy & McDonagh, 2013). Fan engagement in user SMBCs has been discussed in relation to resistance which has been attributed to the following reasons:

Exploitative corporate culture—Unofficial YouTube channels, which are forms of user SMBCs offer football fans an avenue to display their grievances against the exploitative corporate culture of football clubs (Rivers & Ross, 2021). Such corporate cultures are referred to as dystopia by Sturm (2020). He cautions that dystopia arises in three ways: 1) emmeshing fans in difficult commercial relationships thus replacing sports and teams with 'placeless' corporate entities. By 'placeless,' he refers to off-field entertainment becoming more important than on-field sporting events; and 2) exploiting fan loyalty to encourage consumption. Thus, firms will provide a variety of activities to entice 'consumers as fans' to stay longer and undertake more experiences while consuming more merchandise and beverages. An example of corporate culture that was viewed and resisted as a dystopia by fans was the European Super League (ESL). This occurred in 2021 when six of the richest and most powerful owners in English football were involved in the establishing of a new Super League. The Super League aimed to increase revenue by restricting the league to only a small number of elite teams in Europe (Welsh, 2023). Exploitative corporate culture has been known to trigger fan resistance in user SMBCs. Olesen (2018) noted that Liverpool fans used a

hashtag titled #walkouton77 to protest increased football match ticket prices by the Liverpool club owners, Fenway Sports Group (FSG). Similarly, Fenton et al. (2022) point out that Manchester United supporters used a UGC hashtag #EmptyOldTrafford to protest against the Glazer family's (club owners) overcommitment to the club's commercial activities and global reach at the expense of the team's on-field performances. In their study, Fenton et al. (2022) labelled some of these fans as inflammatory aggressives. In another case, Arsenal requested AFTV to withdraw the name 'Arsenal' from its brand-related content over concerns about its negativity and harm to the Arsenal brand thus causing Arsenal Fan TV at the time, to change its name to AFTV (Smith, 2018; Storer, 2018).

ii Incongruence of firm and fans' goals—The incongruence between the goals of firms and fans has been known to trigger protests within user SMBCs. Mishra and Chandel (2019) assert that the inability of brands to satisfy customers on parameters such as functional, ethical, identity mismatch and value deficiency issues, is a catalyst for the formation of anti-brand communities. In relation to this, Veloutsou and Moutinho (2009) acknowledge that the use of communication technologies has helped develop, maintain and enhance brand community lobbying efforts. A case in point has been highlighted by Healy and McDonagh (2013). They found that Red and White Kop (RAWK), a user SMBC, protested Liverpool's reluctance to pursue goals congruous with fan goals (e.g. investing in the team to make it successful, and thus reduce club debts etc.), or to sell their shareholding. This was manifested in the club's lack of willingness to engage with them. As a result, the fans engaged in an anti-brand protest labelled as 'Our Club, Our Shirt' and 'Standards Corrupted' (this was a *twist* of the club's sponsor's name from Standard Chartered to Standards Corrupted-see figure 11). The aim of this protest was to regain control over club affairs through spreading the word of their plight and damaging the brand's income.



iii Firm and fan ideological mismatch—The mismatch between the ideological values of firms and fans has given rise to anti-brand user SMBCs. Brandão and Popoli (2022) draw attention to anti-brand communities in their netnography titled 'I am hatin it! Negative consumer-brand relationships in online anti-brand communities.' They maintain that consumers join anti-brand communities in view of their ideological mismatch with certain brands. This results in negative engagement and activism aimed at destroying the hated brand's image and reputation. This also results in negative brand anthropomorphism which associates brands with hated human behavioural qualities. Almeida (2018) contends that brand anthropomorphism is a predictor for negative consumer-brand relationships. In a study of two Bundes Liga clubs, Popp et al. (2018) found that anti-brand communities were formed around their common dislike of a sponsor's brand. In this case, Red Bull, an energy drink company (sponsor) purchased a football club (SSV Markranstädt) and renamed it, RB Leipzig. In addition, Red Bull redesigned the club's crest and kit. In response to this, fans joined anti-Red Bull communities to oppose Red Bull's corporate changes as they risked losing the traditions and values of the club (SSV Markranstädt now RB Leipzig). These fans considered the Red Bull sponsorship as the ultimate commercialisation of football. Moreover, they alleged that Red Bull was involved in football only for marketing reasons.

iv Negative brand relations—In their study on brand negativity in the context of anti-brand community participation in the technology industry, Dessart et al. (2020) show that two dimensions of negative brand relationship (negative emotional connection and two-way communication) lead to community

participation in anti-brand communities. This is facilitated through social approval and oppositional loyalty. Anti-brand community members are motivated to recommend the community to non-members, which contributes to the growth and sustenance of the community. Similarly, Mednini and Turki (2022) found that consumers participate in an anti-brand communities due to negative brand relationships which are motivated by brand hate and social approval.

2.4.5.2. User SMBCs and marketing strategies

Drawing on brand-related content produced by user SMBCs, various researchers have asserted that it has marketing benefits. Luca (2015) observes that nearly every industry is affected by UGC. Every online interaction has a social element to it, and every type of media is incorporating, competing with, or being replaced by UGC. Social media platforms such as YouTube enable users to engage with each other through the creating and disseminating of content. The common thread across these platforms is that they have UGC. From a comparative angle, Sandunima and Jayasuriya (2024) studied the impact of FGC and UGC on customer purchasing intentions in a fashion industry and found that both FGC and UGC for marketing communication have significant effects on consumer purchase intentions. However, FGC displays a stronger influence on customer purchase intentions. Additionally, their research revealed that consumers showcase a high degree of receptiveness to both FGC and UGC on social media platforms. Hinck (2018) in a study on YouTube, FIFA video games, and AFC Wimbledon found that nerdfighters associated with a YouTube channel called VlogBrothers, sponsored AFC Wimbledon (an English football club). Furthermore, Geurin and Burch (2017) contend that this brand-related content is increasingly utilised by firms in recent years. In their study on user-generated branding via social media for sports apparel companies, they found that UGC elicited greater engagement than FGC. In addition, they note that the integration of UGC in a firm's marketing strategy appears to capitalise on the benefits of brand engagement. They thus recommend the use of UGC in social media marketing. In a similar vein, Geurin (2020) notes that firms have used UGC from brand ambassadors for marketing purposes. These brand ambassadors are motivated by brand community identity, and acquiring free products and/or discounts from firms. Examples of firms using UGC are evident in some literature. Gallegos (2019) reveals that UGC was used by Copa90

(a football media business) in collaboration with Snapchat in a marketing campaign during the 2018 FIFA World Cup. Similarly, in Australian cricket, Morgan and Wilk (2021) note that UGC was used in a brand recovery strategy.

Considering prior discussions on the importance of both official and user SMBCs to various aspects of marketing such as brand engagement and marketing strategies, Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) explain the following points about the negative aspect of SMBCs: 1) a strong brand community can be a threat to a marketer if it collectively rejects marketing efforts or product change, and then use communal communications channels to disseminate the rejection; 2) a more connected and empowered community can be a real problem in that brand communities, operating within computer-mediated environments, could pose enormous rumour control problems; and 3) competitors could easily spy on other brand communities and their internal communication thus, brands could be sabotaged by competitors or brand terrorists misappropriating or subverting community values and interest.

2.4.5.3. Threats to brand equity

An article by marketing journal Strategic Direction (2022) contends that user SMBCs that engage in resistance which borders on anti-brand behaviour seek only to destroy the reputation and value of a brand. In so doing, brands are finding the challenges involved with shifting public perception. Similarly, Dessart et al. (2012) assert that anti-brand communities have a negative impact on brand equity. More recently, Dessart et al. (2020) note that there is a dramatic rise in volume and visibility of negative brand emotion and the power of consumer collectives to leverage negativity to harm brands. At the same time, Cheung et al. (2022) note that negative engagement between consumers and brands could lead to negative brand value. Moreover, the emergence of trolls within social media platforms has been discussed by Crockett (2024) who notes that a social media troll is an individual who intentionally engages in inflammatory, disruptive, or offensive behaviour online to provoke emotional reactions and catalyse controversy. She adds that trolls seek attention and gain satisfaction from causing discord and upsetting others. In this light, Aaker (1991) recommends that brands should be protected from damage. He cautions that the cost of repairing a damaged brand is higher than maintaining it. Therefore, the erosion of a brand should be forecasted so that the remedy can be timely. Based on the foregoing, negative brand engagement of user SMBCs is illustrated diagrammatically in table 15.

Table 15: Negative brand engagement within user SMBCs					
	Attributes	Description			
1.	Autonomy	 User SMBCs are democratic spaces free of a firm's control. Fans can freely deliberate on football club issues on social media. 			
2.	Triggers of negative brand engagement within user SMBCs	 Exploitative corporate culture Incongruence of firm and fans' goals Firm and fan ideological mismatch Negative brand relations 			
3.	Forms of negative brand engagement within user SMBCs	 Protesting using hashtags Twisting sponsor brand names Negative brand anthropomorphism Forming anti-brand communities 			
4.	Threats (outcomes) of negative brand engagement within user SMBCs	 Rise in volume and visibility of negative brand emotions Brand damage Negative impact on brand equity 			

2.4.6. Comparison of official and user SMBCs

From the preceding discussion, official and user SMBCs can be distinguished based on: 1) ownership/control; 2) digital marketing era; 3) brand content production and distribution; and 4) marketing and brand engagement. This is visually illustrated in table 16. Based on table 16, the following three points can be deduced: 1) User SMBCs have emerged as a 21st century phenomenon having come into existence during the prosumption systems era (2000-2020) of digital marketing; 2) An outstanding aspect of user SMBCs is their highly autonomous environment which allows them to engage with brands freely, even if this engagement can be a threat to a firm's brand; and 3) The distinct differences between official and user SMBCs, therefore, lend themselves to further scrutiny in view of how they showcase brand value. This study therefore seeks to address this matter. In this vein, fan segments with different needs and characteristics within sport brand communities showcase brand value in diverse ways.

Tal	Table 16: Comparison between official and user SMBCs						
	Criteria	Official SMBC	User SMBC				
	Ownership/control	Owned and controlled by the firm	Owned and controlled by the consumer, thus, it has a highly autonomous environment				
	Digital marketing era	Emerged during the Traditional market systems era (1980 – 1994)	Emerged during the Prosumption systems era (2000 – 2020)				
	Brand content production and distribution	Produces and shares Firm- generated content (FGC)	Produces and shares Usergenerated Content (UGC)				
	Marketing	FGC is used for marketing strategies	UGC is used in official marketing strategies, and it poses a risk when used to share negative opinions by fans				
	Brand engagement	Brand engagement generally has a positive impact on brand value	User SMBCs including anti- brand communities pose a threat to firms' brand value				

2.5. Fan segmentation in sport brand communities

This section reviews literature on fan segmentation in sport brand communities, as it is an area of focus in this study.

2.5.1. Definition of fan segmentation

Aaker (1991) asserts that segmentation is an overt decision to divide customers into segments based on variables such as age, geographic location, benefits sought, and gender for appropriate brand engagement. Mousavi and Roper (2023) assert that it is important to undertake segmentation when investigating online brand communities so as to understand the impact of members' participation in these communities.

2.5.2. Fan segmentation strategies

The literature reviewed on fan segmentation strategies are guided by Mullin et al. (2014) fan segmentation characteristics. These characteristics are categorised as follows: lifestyle, socio-demographics, product usage, and benefits to customers.

2.5.2.1. Lifestyle characteristics

Lifestyle features such as behavioural support, social media motivation, and social media platforms have been used by various studies to segment fans as follows:

- been used to segment fans by Chiu et al. (2019). They classify fans into three segments, namely: a) Efangelists—fans who exhibit active behavioural support and showcase high levels of advocacy and in so doing, they promote the brand and all positive associations that come with it to people who have so far not acknowledged 'the wonder of it.' As such, they serve as a powerful marketing tool for enticing potential fans; b) Stationary fans—supporters who exhibit inactive and passive behavioural support, and showcase low levels of advocacy; and c) Mild supporters—fans who are more likely to attend games alone and are majorly concerned with their favourite team's performance and victory. They are crucial because they have the potential to become efangelists. Accordingly, professional sports leagues and teams should focus and grow their efforts towards understanding fan profiles based on evangelistic behaviours (Park et al., 2021).
- ii Multifaceted and casual fan segments—Social media motivation has been used to segment fans into two distinct groups namely multifaceted and casual fan segments. This finding emerged from a study by Fischer (2019) on market segmentation in the context of social media usage. On the one hand, multifaceted social media users are die-hard fans and are highly motivated to use social media for economic (ticket prices, betting etc.), information and connection purposes. On the other hand, casual fan social media users are nearly ten years older than multifaceted fans and are highly motivated to use social media for passing time, entertainment, and information.
- Fischer (2019) has segmented fans based on the type of social media platform they prefer to use. In this regard, she identified the following three segments:

 a) the Facebook devotees' segment which includes fans who are most likely to consume sport through Facebook; b) social media aficionados' segment, which consists of fans who are most likely to use Twitter (now X) first to consume sport, and then Facebook and Instagram; and c) infrequent social media users'

segment, which includes fans who do not seem to prefer one platform over another.

iv Green fan segments—In a study on understanding buyer personas, Cruz and Karatzas (2020) point out that there are emerging fan segments based on ethical and moral values. Hence, there are consumers who showcase green consumer behaviour (pro-environmental behaviour) within digital environments. Such consumers can be referred to as green fan segments. In football, such consumers could potentially become the target fan segment of an organisation such as Forest Green Rovers (2024), a vegan English National Legue Football club that values sustainability at the core of all its operations. In 2017, FIFA described them as the greenest football club in the world.

2.5.2.2. Socio-demographic characteristics

Socio-demographic features such as income, age and gender have been used by some studies to segment fans as follows:

- i Income and age-based fan segments—Fan segments have been classified according to income, age, and loyalty. In their study on market segmentation of college football fans in America, Rascher et al. (2021) identified five fan segments. These include: a) high income critics (fans dissatisfied with brand products); b) older experiential seekers (older low-to-middle-income earners who are influenced positively by brand products); b) price-sensitive health-conscious fan seekers (younger lower-income earners who are likely to purchase single-game tickets relative to the other groups); 4) single game, middle-income critics (middle-aged who are likely to purchase single-game tickets); and 5) core football fans (fans who care primarily about the quality of the team and the football product, but do not care about logistics, customer service, promotions etc.). Their study recommends that brand equity is maximised when firms develop appropriate brand products and services and adapt them to specific segments and target groups.
- **ii Female fan segments**—In their study on micro-communities and the formation of social capital, Fenton et al. (2021) found that male hegemony of football fandom is reinforced on social media through sexism and cyberbullying towards female fans. In retaliation, female fans adapted and formed their own

micro-communities, which gave them the opportunity to freely interact and develop strong relationships (social capital) spurred by their love for a football team. In a similar vein, Kunert (2021) focuses on female-led micro-communities established within the larger Tumblr football fan community, which provides a safe space for female fans. She calls them 'The Footy Girls of Tumblr' and depicts how these women found their niche in online fandom including the freedom to talk freely about football. Female fan segments have gendered brand engagement. In their study on self-representations of women's sport fandom on Instagram, Toffoletti et al. (2021) found that female sports fans deploy photographic conventions aimed at showcasing and sharing the experience of participating in a female sport tournament as well as their legitimacy as sport fans.

2.5.2.3. Product usage characteristics

Product usage in terms of loyalty to the brand has been used to segment fans as follows:

Devoted and spectator fan segments—Loyalty has been used by Finch et al. (2022) to segment fans. In their study on season ticket holder segmentation in professional sports, they categorised fans into the following segments: a) Devoted fan segments—these are extremely loyal fans and are often referred to as the evangelist, sports obsessed, burnt-out, hardcore, and family segments; and b) Spectators—are on the verge of becoming extremely loyal fans but still not personally connected to the club. They are frequently referred to as tipping point, pros, old school, connected, next-gen, homers, live gamers, big-screen segment and line-item fans. Therefore, football clubs should focus on converting spectators to devoted fans through marketing strategies that encourage emotional purchases, relationships with similar consumers, and feelings of belongingness to the club. In addition, devoted fans can be used as marketing advocates to support fan retention and potential fan acquisition.

In a study on segmentation of season ticket holders in minor league north American professional sport, O'Reilly et al. (2022) classified fans into the following segments: a) Loyal, Long-term advocate—these are an older segment identifying mostly as male season ticket holders who are highly

influenced by the club's success, sport on and off the field, and are active and passionate advocates for the club; and b) Devoted Boomer—An older segment of fans who hold season tickets, attend every home game, watch every away game on television, and are keen promoters for the sport.

2.5.2.4. Different benefits customers expect from the product

Different benefits customers expect from a product have been used to segment fans in terms of social capital, price, product quality and sportainment (sports and entertainment).

- Creators, contributors and lurkers—Social capital which is concerned with the connections between people, and the value and meaning of those connections, and internet usage have been used by Fenton (2018) to categorise fans into three segments. These include: a) creators—these are fans with strong social capital and are regular and active social media users; b) contributors these are fans with intermediate social capital and are active but irregular social media users; and c) lurkers—these are fans who have weak social capital and read but rarely comment in online groups. His study recommends that lurkers should be engaged through linking social capital via the buyer persona spring. Fletcher (2020) asserts that the buyer persona spring brings the organisation closer to their target market by implementing strategies that consider a consumer's social media channels, content and data. He asserts that these elements form the most crucial parts of the relationship between an organisation and their buyer persona. According to the Buyer Persona Institute (2024), a buyer persona discloses insights about the consumers' decisions the attitudes, concerns, decision criteria, and journey that drive prospective customers to select a brand, its competitor or the status quo. They inform the organisation on how to influence buyers, so they can choose the organisation's brand. They add that buyer personas are important because: 1) they enable data-driven decisions; 2) personalised marketing; and 3) an improved customer experience.
- ii Posters and lurkers—In their study on enhancing relationships through online brand communities, Mousavi and Roper (2023) segment consumers into posters and lurkers. In this case, posters are interactive members of SMBCs

while lurkers are non-interactive members of SMBCs. For posters, trust is driven by their sense of community identity and encouraging members to interact. For lurkers, brand support is required to strengthen their community identity and brand trust. This can be done by: 1) encouraging lurkers to interact and thus recognise their contribution, and 2) providing them with high-quality information.

- fan segments—Price and quality have been used to segment fans by Kaiser et al. (2019) in their study titled 'How well do you know your spectators? A study on spectator segmentation based on preference analysis and willingness to pay for tickets.' Their study revealed the following fan segments: a) price sensitive spectators—these fans have high price sensitivity and so the ticket price is of utmost importance; b) price-performance oriented spectators—these fans have high price sensitivity plus high preference for the quality of seats and the opposing team; c) seat-quality-oriented spectators—these are fans with low price-sensitivity but whose preferences are dominated by the quality and location of the seat; and d) top-game oriented spectators—these fans have medium price sensitivity but highly value competitive opponents compared to the other segments. Their study concludes therefore, that fans are heterogeneous based on their ticket preferences and refutes the assumption that fan preferences are homogeneous.
- iv Fan segments and sportainment—Fans have been segmented according to their connection with sportainment (sport and entertainment). Richelieu and Webb (2021) highlight differences in the way fans connect with sportainment. Their study identified the following segments: a) Fans interested in the sport (game on the field); b) Fans interested in sport and entertainment from traditional sport actors; and c) Fans interested in sport and entertainment from traditional and non-traditional actors. Their study concludes that it is vital to understand fan segments in relation to the sportainment mix in order to increase market segment outreach, fan connection, and fan lifetime value (the amount of money a fan dedicates to a brand during his/her lifetime).
- **Soccer enthusiasts and sports fans**—Fans' needs have been considered when classifying them into different segments. Green (2019) notes that fan

segmentation in Major League Soccer (MLS) is based on fans' needs as follows: a) Soccer enthusiasts—these are fans who consider soccer to be their preferred sport and have a positive perception of the MLS. Additionally, they are interested in on-field performance and team rivalries; and b) sports fans—these are fans who view soccer as one of a group of sports but not as their preferred sport. They also have a positive perception of the MLS and other sport leagues, and are more interested in atmosphere of the stadium and the social aspect of watching a game.

From the foregoing, two key points are noted: 1) fans are heterogeneous based on their brand-related preferences and the assumption that fan preferences are homogeneous is refuted; and 2) brand equity is maximised when firms develop appropriate brand products and services, and adapt them to specific segments and target groups. As such, this study will utilise a fan segmentation approach to understand different ways in how brand equity is showcased in official and user SMBCs. The next section focuses on literature gaps that this study aims to address.

2.6. Literature gaps

Following the review on literature in this chapter, research gaps have been identified in three areas. These areas are: SMBCs, brand engagement within SMBCs, and negative brand engagement within SMBCs.

2.6.1. SMBCs

Woods and Ludvigsen (2022) recommend that further study of fan online spaces should be undertaken, noting that football Fan TV YouTube channels are yet to be sufficiently examined. In addition, Hook et al. (2018) recommend that research should be undertaken on the long-term consequences of brand community participation. They also call for research on fan segmentation across all forms of brand communities. Drawing on qualitative methodology, Trivedi et al. (2021) recommend that a small sample should be used to unravel deeper insights related to fan behaviour on social media platforms. In a similar vein, Cheung et al. (2022) call for qualitative research on brand community dynamics and different perspectives of consumer and brand community relationships. Sharif et al. (2022) studied antecedents of brand loyalty using brand personality as a moderator in SMBCs of fashion clothing brands. They

recommend that: 1) a comparative study should be undertaken of at least two different social media platforms, or in different social contexts; and 2) it should focus on different industry sectors. Dessart et al. (2015) also called for a study on the comparison of online brand community engagement across different social media platforms. With regard to the methodology of key research reviewed in this study, qualitative research, specifically netnographic studies on SMBCs in football are scarce, specifically in comparison to quantitative studies. This is illustrated in Appendix 1 (Methodology of the key research reviewed in chapter 2 [SMBCs]). Thus, this study aims to contribute towards netnographic research on SMBCs and football.

2.6.2. Brand engagement within SMBCs

Hollebeek et al. (2017) studied virtual brand community engagement practices and have provided insights into consumers' brand-related thought processes, motivations, desires, views, dilemmas, and consumption habits. Despite their efforts, they have recommended that further research should be undertaken to develop a deeper understanding regarding the key drivers, relative importance, and key outcomes of virtual brand community engagement practices for brands, sectors, and industries. Stegmann et al. (2021) recommend that studies should focus on digital engagement within social media platforms at a micro-level with the aim of finding out how value can be created within such platforms. They add that such studies should do this using a netnographic approach. McDonald et al. (2022) assert that sport, with its intrinsically strong interactions for both participants and fans, is an ideal setting to study customer engagement. In addition, considering that customer engagement is context dependent, and sport is known to have unique characteristics, the adaptability of customer engagement in a sport context, has only been superficially examined. They add that consequently, a greater understanding of the antecedents and consequences of customer engagement aids in the establishment of long-term, interactive relationships between customers and organisations, enhancing the organisation's performance and improving customer loyalty. In this context, they present the following areas on customer brand engagement, and SMBCs for further research (see table 17).

With regard to marketing strategies that enhance customer brand engagement within SMBCs, Li et al. (2021) recommends the following areas for further research: 1) Social media marketing to segment markets that exist within social media platforms;

2) Social media content strategies with a focus on finding out what social media content can help improve marketing objectives such as brand loyalty; 3) Social monitoring strategy with the aim of finding the most suitable way for organisations to engage and impact customer engagement; 4) Social customer relationship marketing strategy with a focus on discovering how specific types of digital engagement practices contribute to brand equity; and 5) International marketing aspects with the aim of finding out how cultural factors moderate social media customer behaviours across different countries.

Table 17: Calls for further research on customer brand engagement and SMBCs

- 1. The unique aspects of sport, while not impacting upon overall patterns of consumer behaviour, are likely to impact upon the expression of customer brand engagement and its' management. How and why this impact occurs is yet to be determined, and requires examination.
- 2. The nomological network of customer brand engagement in a sporting context is yet to be determined. While some alignment with other contexts is anticipated, the unique motivations and complexities of sporting contexts is expected to result in unique antecedents and outcomes.
- 3. In a context where the outcome of the core experience is uncertain, negative fan brand engagement is under-researched. The origins or motivations of those undertaking negative sport customer brand engagement requires a deeper understanding.
- 4. The sport context is a rich vehicle to examine the role of both physical and virtual engagement platforms that bring together groups of actors (e.g. fans, athletes, sponsors), and understand how engagement practices develop within these platforms among collective groups of actors.

Adapted from McDonald et al. (2022)

With regard to marketing strategies that enhance customer brand engagement within SMBCs, Li et al. (2021) recommends the following areas for further research: 1) Social media marketing to segment markets that exist within social media platforms; 2) Social media content strategies with a focus on finding out what social media content can help improve marketing objectives such as brand loyalty; 3) Social monitoring strategy with the aim of finding the most suitable way for organisations to engage and impact customer engagement; 4) Social customer relationship marketing strategy with a focus on discovering how specific types of digital engagement practices contribute to brand equity; and 5) International marketing aspects with the aim of finding out how cultural factors moderate social media customer behaviours across different countries.

2.6.3. Negative brand engagement

Various scholars concur that there is need for further research on negative brand engagement. Mishra and Chandel (2019) have noted that there is scant literature on anti-brand communities. They recommend that these communities should be closely monitored in order to understand their dynamics. Additionally, they contend that these communities can help managers to reach out to disgruntled consumers and turn their negativity and emotional outbursts into learning experiences that in turn can improve brand value. Chang and Hsu (2022) suggest that future research can explore the negative antecedents and consequences of customer engagement. Similarly, Obilo et al. (2021) recommend that future research should explore the negative side of engagement in more detail. Cheung et al. (2022) note that negative interactions between consumers and brands could lead to negative brand value and should thus be explored. Hook et al. (2018) have called for further research on the negative consequences (for all brand community stakeholders e.g. community participants, the company etc.) of brand community participation across all forms of brand communities. Li et al. (2021) recommends that studies should focus on social media commerce strategies with the aim of finding out what the dark side of using social media as a promotional tool is. In this context, research on negative brand relationships as an important and urgent agenda for brand scholarship in the 21st century is warranted.

2.7. Summary

This chapter has provided an overview of SMBCs and reviewed literature on brand engagement and official and user SMBCs, and fan segmentation in sport brand communities. Based on this discussion, the following trends have emerged: 1) The emergence of hyperdigitalised football brand communities which is nascent to the new and hyper digital era; 2) The emergence of user SMBCs such as football Fan TV YouTube channels as a 21st century phenomenon; 3) Official SMBCs can be distinguished from user SMBCs based on brand-related content ownership, production and distribution; 4) User SMBCs including anti-brand communities pose a threat to brand value; 5) Fans are heterogeneous based on their brand-related preferences and the assumption that fan preferences are homogeneous is refuted; and 6) There is scant

research on SMBCs, brand engagement within SMBCs and negative brand engagement in SMBCs. It is in this context that this study will capture how brand value is showcased within official and user SMBCs such as football official and Fan TV YouTube channels. In addition, segments will be identified based on how fans within football official and Fan TV YouTube channels which represent official and user SMBCs respectively, showcase brand value. The next chapter reviews relevant brand equity literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW II: BRAND EQUITY

3.1. Introduction

This chapter entails literature on the concept of brand equity. It begins with an overview of the concept in light of its existence in three different eras (the conception era, the comparison era, and the contemporary era). Additionally, it highlights literature on brand equity and SMBCs, and brand equity and sport. This chapter continues with a discussion on Aaker (1991) concept of brand equity as it forms the theoretical framework of this thesis. Thus, Aaker's view on the value of a brand is highlighted and a literature review on the dimensions (brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand associations), which lead to brand equity is depicted. It then showcases Aaker (1991) brand equity concept in the context of football official and Fan TV YouTube channels. This is followed by a summary or this chapter.

3.2. Overview of brand equity

This section discusses relevant literature on brand equity, which forms the conceptual framework of this study. It starts by showing the origin of brand equity in the context of three chronological eras (the conception era, the comparison era, and the contemporary era). This is followed by a literature review on: 1) brand equity and SMBCs; and 2) brand equity and sport.

3.2.1. Brand equity eras

The concept of brand equity has been discussed by various authors in the context of the following eras: 1) The conception era (1991 – 2000); 2) The comparison era (2001 – 2010); and 3) The contemporary era (2011 – 2020). In light of this, the analytical features of a literature review might include outlining the intellectual progression of a field, including key debates. Moreover, historical literature reviews focus on evaluating research throughout a period of time, often starting with the first time an issue, concept, theory, phenomena emerged in the literature, then tracing its evolution within the scholarship of a discipline. The purpose is to place research in a historical context to show familiarity with state-of-the-art developments and to recognise the likely directions for future research (USC, 2023).

3.2.1.1. The conception era (1991 – 2000)

In this era, Aaker (1991) defines brand equity as "a set of assets such as name awareness, loyal customers, perceived quality, and associations that are linked to the brand (its name and symbol) and add (or subtract) value to the product or service being offered" (p. 18). According to Aaker (1991), the development of brand equity can create associations that drive market positions, persist over long periods of time, and have the power to resist aggressive competitors. However, it can also involve initial and continuous investment, which can be substantial and will not necessarily result in short-term profits thus making rewards come after decades. Thus, he asserts that the management of brand equity is difficult, requiring patience and vision. When writing about brand equity, Keller (1993) defines customer-based brand equity as "the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of a brand" (p. 2). He highlights the following three points on customer-based brand equity: 1) A brand has positive (negative) customer-based brand equity when consumers react more (less) favourably to an element of the marketing mix for a brand as compared to an element of the marketing mix for fictitiously named or unnamed versions of a product or service. The marketing mix includes product, price, place and promotion (Yudelson, 1999); 2) Brand knowledge takes shape according to an associative network memory model in terms of two components, brand awareness and brand image (a group of brand associations); and 3) Customer-based brand equity occurs when the consumer is acquainted and holds favourable, strong and unique brand associations in memory.

In this era, Simon and Sullivan (1993) use a cash-flow perspective to view brand equity. They define brand equity "as the incremental cash flows which accrue to branded products over unbranded products" (p. 1). Their estimation technique derives the value of brand equity from the value of the firm's other assets. They note the following three points based on the usefulness of this technique: 1) The macro approach allocates an objective value to a company's brand and relates this value to the determinants of brand equity; 2) The macro approach isolates changes in brand equity at the individual brand level by evaluating the response of brand equity to key marketing decisions; and 3) Brand equity, correctly and objectively measured, is the suitable metric for assessing the long-run impact of marketing decisions. From a different viewpoint, Kamakura and Russell (1993) distance the concept of brand

equity from price and advertising and discuss it in the context of brand value. They note that brand value measures perceived quality, which is the value consumers attribute to the brand after disregarding current prices and recent advertising exposure. Park and Srinivasan (1994) use the term customer-based brand equity from Keller (1993). They note that customer-based brand equity is the added value endowed by a brand to the product as perceived by a consumer. They measure brand equity as the difference between an individual consumer's overall brand preference and his or her brand preference on the basis of objectively measured product attribute levels. Lastly, Yoo et al. (2000) explore the relationships between selected marketing mix elements and the creation of brand equity. They found that frequent price promotions such as price deals are linked to low brand equity, whereas high advertising spending, high price, good store image, and high distribution intensity are linked to high brand equity.

3.2.1.2. The comparison era (2001 – 2009)

In the comparison era, Yoo and Donthu (2001) refer to the concept of brand equity as the utility or value added to a product by its brand name. From a consumer-based behaviour stand point, they define brand equity as "as consumers' different response between a focal brand and an unbranded product when both have the same level of marketing stimuli and product attributes" (p. 1). They contend that the difference in consumer response is credited to the brand name and demonstrates the result of the long-term marketing investment towards a brand. In addition, they assert that both Keller (1993) and Aaker (1991) brand equity dimensions are popularly accepted as valid and comprehensive. Ailawadi et al. (2003) propose that the revenue premium a brand generates in comparison with that of a private label product is a simple, objective, and managerially useful product-market measure of brand equity. In this sense, they assert that equity is created by: 1) the marketing mix (price) of both the brand and its competitors; 2) the firm's previously existing strength from its corporate image, product line, research and development, and other capabilities; and 3) market size and perceived risk.

Srinivasan et al. (2005) assert that brand equity has been one of the most significant marketing concepts in both academia and practice. They define brand equity as "the incremental contribution per year obtained by the brand in comparison to the underlying product (or service) with no brand-building efforts" (p. 1433).

Additionally, they note that the incremental contribution is catalysed by the individual customer's cumulative choice probability for the brand as compared to his/her choice probability for the underlying product with no brand building efforts. Furthermore they conceptualise the creation of brand equity from the following three direct effects: 1) Increased brand awareness; 2) Incremental preference due to enhanced attribute perceptions; and 3) Incremental non attribute perceptions. Pappu et al. (2005) note that favourable perceptions of a particular brand from consumers leads to competitive advantage for a firm. They also acknowledge that Aaker (1991) provides the most comprehensive definition of brand equity. Thus, they propose the following three associative relationships among four consumer-based brand equity dimensions (brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty) in accordance to conceptualisations by Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993): 1) Consumers' perception of quality is linked to their loyalty to a brand whereby, the more loyal a consumer is, the more he/she is likely to perceive the brand as one of higher quality and vice versa; 2) The more favourable associations consumers have towards a brand, the higher their loyalty is and vice versa. Moreover, consumers who hold favourable associations towards a brand develop favourable perceived quality; and 3) Consumers' showcase high brand awareness when they have strong associations for the brand and when they perceive the quality of the brand to be high and vice versa.

Konecnik and Gartner (2007) note that brand equity is the total of all the factors or dimensions contributing to a brand's value in the consumer's mind. Their study revealed that an image plays a significant role in brand equity evaluation, however, for a more comprehensive evaluation, the dimensions of awareness, quality, and loyalty should also be examined. Brady et al. (2008) note that incongruity between a negative encounter from a respected brand may strengthen customer backlash. On the other hand, positive associations derived from an organisation's brand's equity may weaken the effects of an incident of failure. They define brand equity through the following key points: 1) "Brand equity is a perception or belief that extends beyond mere familiarity to an extent of superiority that is not necessarily tied to specific actions" (p. 152); 2) Brand familiarity, commitment and loyalty do not mean brand superiority. This is apparent by comparison to continuance commitment, where a consumer is committed to an organisation because of financial investment or lack of alternative options rather than by a belief in the superiority of the firm; 3) Inherent in

commitment and loyalty conceptualisations is an act of devotion, whether voluntary or involuntary; and 4) Brand equity does not imply action, only perception.

3.2.1.3. The contemporary era (2010 - 2020)

In this era, Christodoulides and De Chernatony (2010) note that the main recipients of brand equity are either firms or consumers. They assert that financial value of brand equity is only the result of consumer reactions to a brand name. For them, the value that consumers get from a brand is considered the driving force of increased market share and profitability of the brand, and is centred on consumer-based brand equity. They propose that consumer-based brand equity contains elements such as: a set of perceptions, attitudes, knowledge, and behaviours on the part of consumers that results in increased utility and enables a brand to gain greater margins than it could without the brand name. Chen (2010) argues that undertaking green marketing for companies could raise their intangible brand equities and asserts the following three points about green brand equity: 1) If organisations can offer products or services that satisfy their customers' environmental needs, then their customers would react more favourably to their products or services; 2) In an era when organisations are paying attention to their impact on the environment, it is essential for firms to find opportunities to improve their products' environmental performance so as to enhance their brand equities; and 3) Investing in resources to increase green brand image, green satisfaction, and green trust supports the enhancement of green brand equity.

Nam et al. (2011) note that brand equity is conceptually broader when it includes brand image and brand familiarity. They assert that brand loyalty (a dimension of brand equity) has traditionally been conceived as a behavioural idea relating to repeat purchase behaviour. They argue against this as they contend that brand equity involves favourable disposition that may not necessarily result in repetitive purchase behaviour. For them, brand equity is conceptually broader, which encompasses brand image (e.g., perception of service quality) and brand familiarity. For them, brand loyalty has traditionally been conceived as a behavioural construct relating to intentions towards repeat purchase. Thus behavioural intentions such as brand loyalty are a consequence of brand equity rather than a component.

Spry et al. (2011) suggests the following four points on endorser celebrity credibility and brand equity: 1) Endorser credibility has a direct influence on brand equity when

their relationship is mediated by brand credibility; 2) A celebrity endorser should be one who is perceived as credible based on their appeal, expertise and trustworthiness; and 3) Even a celebrity with low credibility is able to enhance a brand.

Godey et al. (2016) assert that social media marketing efforts have a positive influence on: 1) brand equity dimensions such as brand awareness, brand image, and brand loyalty; and 2) preference and willingness to pay a premium price.

Iglesias et al. (2019) note the following three points on sensory brand experience and brand equity: 1) Through customer satisfaction and customer affective commitment, sensory brand experience has a positive indirect effect on brand equity; 2) Customer satisfaction positively affects customer commitment; and 3) Employee empathy negatively moderates the link between sensory brand experience and customer satisfaction.

3.2.2. Brand equity and SMBCs

Brand equity has been discussed by various authors in the context of social media, brand engagement, and SMBCs. Zahoor and Qureshi (2017) note the following four points about social media: 1) Social media has fundamentally changed the marketing landscape and the way product and company information is exchanged between organisations and customers; 2) Social media has provided extended channels and engagement points among customers and between customers and organisations, which transcends traditional marketing and business models; 3) Social media has in particular influenced the way consumers are influenced by the external sources of information, rather than information that is sponsored, designed and controlled by organisations; and 4) Social media is significantly influencing the way consumers develop brand preferences, choices, brand loyalty and brand equity. Rossolatos (2019) asserts that SMBCs have a co-creative, participatory potential whereby consumers actively contribute to the production of meaningful brand avenues in a virtual mutual relationship with brands. He adds that improved brand loyalty and enhanced brand equity have been repeatedly proposed as outcomes of a positively engaged community of brand aficionados. Contrary to this, negative brand co-creation or brand codestruction have been gradually found to exist in extant literature.

In their research on the effect of customer social participation in hotel SMBCs on consumer-based brand equity and advocacy, Abdel-Aty and Deraz (2022) contend that

brand equity results in an abundance of positive outcomes for customers. These are customer brand advocacy, consumer preference, brand choice, and positive word-of-mouth. They add that for organisations, brand equity yields positive results such as brand reputation, market success, and market share. Masa'deh et al. (2021) considered brand image and brand awareness as dimensions of brand equity, and essential components of brand knowledge in Jordan's airline industry. They note that entrepreneurs and business owners should be concerned about exploring the extent to which social media influences customers in order to improve marketing strategies. Their study found that there was a significant impact of social media activities on brand equity. More specifically: 1) entertainment, customisation, interaction, and e-word of mouth are crucial predictors of brand image; 2) brand awareness cannot be predicted by entertainment; 3) brand image cannot be predicted by trendiness; and 4) brand equity cannot be predicted by e-word of mouth despite their corelation.

Hoang et al. (2020) focused on brand awareness and brand loyalty as aspects of customer-based brand equity in their study on brand equity in SMBCs. They note that to foster customer-based brand equity, organisations need to comprehend their customers' behaviour in SMBCs. The following four findings emerged from their study: 1) The need to improve the markers of SMBCs whereby the definition of customers' shared consciousness is crucial; 2) To shape the commitment toward the brand's community and build customer-based brand equity, an obligation to community must be developed. Therefore, rules and incentives are needed to encourage members to advice and ensure that members have a feeling of responsibility to SMBCs. This leads to customers sharing their experiences in order to assist other members in solving product or service-related problems; 3) To encourage customer participation in SMBCs, a common SMBC tradition must be established; and 4) A comprehension of the difference in behaviours in SMBC between male and female customers enables firms to establish suitable marketing policies that build brand community commitment, which in turn stimulates customer-based brand equity.

In their study on gamification, brand engagement and equity in mobile phone SMBCs, Xi and Hamari (2020) note that gamification has become a popular technique in marketing. They add that many organisations believe that gamification can increase the engagement, awareness and loyalty of consumers with respect to a brand. The results of their study indicate that: 1) achievement and social interaction-related

gamification features are positively linked with all three forms of brand engagement (emotional, cognitive and social); 2) immersion-related gamification features are only positively linked with social brand engagement; 3) Brand engagement is positively associated with brand equity; and 4) Gamification can positively affect brand engagement and further increase brand equity thus, gamification is an effective technique for brand management. In discussing consumer engagement in SMBCs and brand loyalty, Liu et al. (2019) postulate that recognition, community identification and self-efficacy, have significant positive effects on consumer engagement in SMBCs, which consequently improves brand loyalty.

In their study on the relationship between social media marketing and brand equity in the luxury industry, Zollo et al. (2020) note that consumers are gradually using SMBCs to collect information about brands to inform their purchase decisions. Their study found that cognitive, personal integrative, and social integrative benefits mediate the relationship between social media marketing and customer-based brand equity. Specifically, they contend that social media marketing activities perceived by consumers influence brand equity especially if digital consumer experiences with the brand are positive and if they obtain cognitive, social, and personal benefits when they browse luxury brand SMBCs. In addition, they suggest that social media marketing activities received by consumers lead to perceived benefits and brand experience, which both then lead to consumer-based brand equity except for hedonic benefits, which are not significantly linked to customer-based brand equity.

Cheng et al. (2019) conducted a study on linking relationship equity to brand resonance in SMBCs of global brands. They found that information search and social interactivity are the antecedents of customer brand engagement and customer brand engagement is a dynamic of brand resonance. They note that a brand is able to enjoy the synthesised values of relationship equity and brand equity by allocating appropriate resources to SMBC management, and that the more an online user participates in an SMBC, the higher the levels of brand value that are created for an organisation's brand.

Majeed et al. (2021) studied the influence of social media on purchase intention by focusing on brand equity as a mediating factor in the fashion industry. They found that social media marketing strategies have a positive impact on social media engagement by users. They suggest that how organisations connect with their costumers online

results in positive or negative interactions that further affect their brand equity. Moreover, they propose that fashion brands should communicate clearly to consumers in order to achieve returns on their marketing investments. Lastly, they assert that organisations need to embrace social media as part of their marketing strategy by tailoring digital marketing activities towards their target audience so as to engage with consumers and improve sales. Lim et al. (2020) conducted research on the impact of social media activity outcomes on the brand equity of Fortune 500 firms. They note that organisations are increasingly using social media platforms to engage with individuals, and social media activity outcomes such as the number of user comments, followers or likes, influence brand equity. Their study found that: 1) social media plays an important role in creating and determining an organisation's brand equity; 2) firms need to target relevant social media platform activity outcomes and then develop focused strategies that can improve brand equity; and 3) social media activity outcome levels of various types of social media platforms are contingent upon a firm's brand country of origin and industry classification.

Sagynbekova et al. (2021) postulate that beyond its power to improve the generation of goals and objectives, comprehending an organisation's brand equity is a key driver in communication values to consumers. Their study which focused on social media communication and higher education brand equity found that universities can better place themselves to compete when they use both user-generated and firm-generated social media communication in building their brand equity.

3.2.3. Brand equity and sport

In the context of sports, Brunello (2018) notes that brand equity refers to the value that supporters attach to their favourite team's name and symbol. Thus, brand building activities influence fan behaviour, which lead to increased match attendance, merchandise sales and participation in sports. In this same context, scholarly attention on brand equity has been geared towards corporate social responsibility (CSR). Manoli and Kenyon (2018) discuss customer-based brand equity in the milieu of how brand equity can be built through perceived CSR. In addition, they explore the role online communities and team activities play in the relationship between perceived CSR and customer-based brand equity. Their study found the following: 1) Team identification had a significant effect on brand equity; 2) Awareness of CSR initiatives does not lead

to brand equity without sport fans' team identification thus, sport fans' attitude toward their team is a prerequisite of building brand equity; and 3) Perceived CSR activities of a team allow sport fans to feel proud of their team, which strengthens their team identification and team brand equity. They recommend that further research should be conducted in online community identification and its relationship with customer-based brand equity. In another study, Ma and Kaplanidou (2021) focus on how CSR and social identities lead to corporate brand equity in the context of sport teams as brand extensions. They contend that brand equity perceptions can be improved by increasing social identities. Their study found that: 1) the higher the perception of perceived CSR and perceived team CSR, the more positively fans evaluated a corporate brand; 2) the higher the perception of a corporation's CSR, the more fans feel connected to a corporation and the more positively they evaluate a corporate brand in a professional baseball context; and 3) The more fans feel connected to a local city, the more they feel connected to a team and a corporation and therefore, the more positively they evaluate a corporate brand. Thus, city identity has a positive influence on consumercompany identity and on corporate brand equity.

Apart from organisations' CSR activities, researchers have focused on other areas of brand equity in the sporting context. Park et al. (2019) studied athletes' brand equity, spectator satisfaction, and behavioural intentions. They note that an athlete's performance as a product in the sports events is linked to brand association and brand equity. Their study found the following: 1) An athletes brand equity improves fan satisfaction and repurchasing intention; and 2) Brand equity is positively associated with satisfaction, which in turn, is positively linked to behavioural intentions. They assert that athletes have brand equity, which includes their own symbolic meaning, value, name, and game performance established in the sports industry.

Yağız and Özer (2022) focus on examining the relationships between brand knowledge, brand responses and brand resonance in sports leagues within the scope of consumer-based brand equity. Their study found that brand associations play a crucial role for a brand to gain positive responses and resonance with fans of Turkish top tier league, the Super League. Additionally, their study found that obtaining cognitive responses such as brand credibility and affective responses such as emotional feelings from consumers can increase the degree of brand resonance.

Wang and Tang (2018) examined the antecedents of sport team brand equity in the Chinese Professional Baseball League (CPBL) from a dual identification perspective. They note that the practice of developing brand equity in the context of professional sport teams is popular. They add that the formation of sport team brand equity in sport marketing literature is still relatively unknown and incompletely understood. Their study found that marketplace characteristics (group experience, salient experience, team history, and fan rituals), and brand identified-related factors (self-congruity and team brand prestige) are significantly related to identification with a sport team and identification with a sports team's brand, respectively. In turn, both identification with a sport team and identification with a sport team's brand are significant predictors of a sport team's brand equity.

Tsordia et al. (2018) focused on the influence of sport sponsorship on brand equity and purchase behaviour. They used a professional basketball club and a software company as a case. Their study found that perceived quality and brand engagement influence brand loyalty and purchase behaviour of fans toward a sponsor's product. Thus, sponsors need to initiate and maintain conversations with and between sport fans. They also need to provide various communication and engagement activities for them with the aim of increasing fan perceptions towards the fit between the sponsor and the team, and the perceptions of quality of the sponsor's product brand. Their study also found that perceived fit between sponsor and club, and team identification significantly influence brand equity constructs. Thus, brand awareness does not influence fans to engage with a sponsor's brand, and that this relationship is strong when fans perceive the quality of sponsor's product to be high.

Zhou et al. (2020) conducted a study on how consumer's perception of sports stars' personal brand promotes consumers' brand love using a global brand equity model. Their study found that that: 1) the use of sports stars' personal brands (attractiveness, expertise, and congruence) was positively related to global brand equity and brand love; 2) highly popular sports stars have a strong marketing appeal to global consumers in the context of their cultural unions; 3) the effect of sports stars' personal brands suppress the influence of the corporate brands they endorse; 4) sports stars' personal brand characteristics have a significant influence on consumers' perception of global brand equity citizenship; 5) consumers tend to seek the symbolic value of a product or service rather than the functional value of a global brand thus, a global brand should

be designed to satisfy consumers' needs with regard to aesthetic and symbolic value. Zhou et al. (2020) contend that ultimately, the global image of sports stars helps customers develop enhanced self-worth, and a sense of global community through interactions with these stars and their brands.

Hattula (2018) studied the link between brand equity and on field performance in professional sports. Their study found that there is a positive but diminishing influence of brand equity on performance. Specifically, increases in brand equity stimulate onfield performance more at lower levels than comparable improvements at higher levels of brand equity. Additionally, high equity clubs entice the interest of talented players thus players are more motivated to play for high equity clubs than for low equity ones. Maanda et al. (2020) focus on the influence of sport sponsorship on brand equity in South Africa. They assert that sponsorship has a major role to play in creating brand awareness and brand image. Their study found that: 1) sport sponsorship can create, maintain and enhance brand awareness, which is one of the key marketing objectives for companies involved in sport sponsorship; 2) sport sponsorship does not affect brand loyalty; 3) sponsorship plays a positive and crucial role in the perception of service quality. This implies that companies should not engage in sport sponsorship expecting enhanced consumers' perception of quality; 4) perceived appropriate fit between the sponsor and the sport event has a negative effect on brand awareness; and 5) sponsorship fit does not have a positive influence on brand image.

Charumbira (2018) focused on the integrated conceptual framework for understanding perceived brand equity in professional sports teams. His study found that team sport brand equity is an aggregate of brand awareness, brand associations and brand relationships. Thus, brand relationship is an additional brand equity dimension. Coelho et al. (2019) studied the impact of FIFA's (Fédération Internationale de

Football Association) reputation and world cup image on sponsor brand equity. Their study found that FIFA's reputation impacts the World Cup's image but does not directly influence the event sponsors' consumer-based brand equities. Additionally, their study found that the perception of fit between the mega-event and its sponsors has a mediating effect on the relationship between mega-event's and the sponsor's brand equity. They suggest that the World Cup holds a strong and positive image in the mega-event spectators' minds and association with this event may bring benefits to sponsors. Furthermore, the mega-event image, whether stable or not, is influenced

by FIFA's reputation and is enhanced or damaged depending on expectations being surpassed or unmet, respectively. Ultimately, sponsorship brings competitive advantage, differentiation thus, adding value to a brand.

Through their study on the reverse effects of sponsorship in relation to establishing sport brand equity, Cobbs and Groza (2022) found that sponsors' brands positively influence perceived prestige of a sponsored property, which directly affects the sponsored property's brand equity. Moreover, they suggest that proactive sports brands can build their own brand equity by aligning with sponsoring firms that carry a high level of brand equity. Thus, perceived prestige is an important process that individuals use when assessing the brand image of an organisation.

Hanson et al. (2019) studied the relationship between intercollegiate athletic programs, university brand equity and student satisfaction. Their study found that relationships between brand equity and student satisfaction show that athletic programs provide a benefit to universities by improving students' psychological sense of community and emotional connection to the institution. Their study also found that sports spectatorship appears to affect student's perceived quality and campus atmosphere through satisfaction, brand equity and emotional attachment. They suggest that marketing and promotions related to athletics should emphasise factors such as social aspects of games, a personal connection with the team, and the university's sports related traditions.

Cho and Chiu (2020) conducted a study on the relationship between sport nostalgia and customer equity and future behaviour. They found that: 1) value equity, brand equity, and relationship equity positively affect intentions of revisitation and word of mouth; 2) nostalgia positively affects value equity, brand equity and relationship equity—thus, nostalgia, which is a predominantly positive emotion, can increase customer equity: 3) value equity directly influences sport fans' revisit intentions and word-of-mouth intentions—thus, high value equity perceived by sport fans enhances their behavioural intentions; 4) relationship equity positively affects behavioural intentions—thus, when customers' relationship with organisations is valued or prioritised, customers indulge in positive behavioural responses; 5) there are indirect effects of nostalgia on behavioural intentions through customer equity—thus, customers having a pleasant experience with a positively perceived brand develop a special attachment to a particular brand; and 6) positive feelings experienced in the

past play a significant role in influencing customer equity, which encourages positive behavioural intentions for sport fans—thus, they revisit and spark favourable word of mouth.

Through their study titled 'Brand Lovemarks Scale of Sport Fans,' Shuv-Ami et al. (2018) found that: 1) the relationship of sport fans with their team is more emotional than functional—it is an emotional relationship because of the feelings that are created: belonging, bonding with other people, joy, and happiness; and 2) fans consider their team as a 'Lovemarks' team and will probably remain loyal fans even if their team has a negative on-field performance. Shuv-Ami et al. (2018) utilise the Lovemarks scale for sport teams to provide a new way of classifying sports fans. In this light, they note that: 1) fans with high respect and high love for a team are considered as 'Lovemarks Fans.'—they are the loyal fans who support their team in both good and bad circumstances; 2) fans who have high respect and low love are 'Performance and Quality Fans,' and are only loyal as long as the team is performing as they expected; 3) fans who are considered as 'Fad Spectators' are those who watch and attend matches, but only when there is an important match or for reasons not related to the game (attending with friends, attending because it is an interesting event, to show themselves in a high-status event etc.); and 4) fans who are considered as 'Spectators' have almost nothing to do with the team. They are low in both love and respect for the team. They watch and attend matches because of their love for the sport. They don't care who wins or loses. They enjoy the quality and performance of either team as long as their players play well.

3.3. Aaker's brand equity concept and dimensions

This section focuses on the brand equity concept by Aaker (1991). In his book review of Managing Brand Equity by Aaker (1991), Shocker (1993) acknowledges that Aaker is well qualified to share knowledge on brand equity. He notes that Aaker's work in advertising, marketing strategy, marketing research, product positioning, and product quality adequately fall under the topic of brand equity. Additionally, Shocker (1993) asserts that Aaker displays considerable sensitivity and insight into the complexities of managing brand equity. While recognising Aaker's work in brand equity, it is worth acknowledging Kevin Keller who is another brand equity scholar from the conception era (1991 – 2000). Keller (2016) notes that his journal article titled 'Conceptualizing,

Measuring, and Managing Customer-Based Brand Equity,' which he wrote in 1993 was one of the early thought pieces and review papers on branding in the field of brand equity. Moreover, he asserts that the article was written to be an extensive bridge between the theory and practice of branding and has thus received a large number of citations and several awards through the years. Regardless, this study adopts Aakers (1991) brand equity concept largely because it pays special attention to the longevity of a brand, which relates to football club brands that have existed for long periods of time. The Arsenal brand for instance, was formed in late 1886 (Arsenal, 2017).

3.3.1 Aaker's brand equity concept

Aaker (1991) notes that the creation of brand equity can develop associations that can drive market positions, continue over long time periods, and be capable of resisting aggressive competitors. However, it can also involve an initial and ongoing investment, which can be substantial and will not necessarily yield short-term profits. Payoffs, when they come, can involve decades. Thus, management of brand equity is difficult, requiring patience and vision. Thimothy (2021) asserts that developing brand equity helps in efforts to increase profit margins by growing its consumers' perceived value. He contends that brand equity is important because of the following three reasons: 1) It helps increase brand awareness—consumers are more likely to buy a brand that they are familiar with and adds to the value of the products that are sold under its name. This also leads to positive brand associations; 2) It creates brand associations and grows perceived value. This occurs when company characteristics become ingrained in the minds of consumers. A brand association aims to link positive attributes such as premium, quality, luxury etc. Aaker (1991) explains that unique brand associations are established through product attributes, names, packages, distribution strategies, and advertising. He adds that the aim of this is to shift beyond commodities to brand products so as to reduce the primacy of price upon the purchase decision, and stress the bases of differentiation. Brand equity builds the relationships between the perceived benefits and perceived costs that people relate to that product; and; 3) It develops relationships with consumers by promoting brand loyalty. Organisations that strive to create genuine relationships with their customers and intentionally work on promoting brand loyalty get substantial financial benefits in the long run.

Aaker (1991) stresses that still, there is increased competition for the consumers' minds as well as for access to the distribution channels meaning that brands are often demoted to a niche market, and so will lack the sales to uphold expensive marketing programs. He highlights the following eight reasons as to why there was and still is a need for a brand equity concept: 1) Managers could not recognise with confidence the brand associations and the strength of those associations; 2) Lack of knowledge on brand awareness levels; 3) There was no systematic, reliable, sensitive, and valid measure of customer satisfaction and loyalty nor any diagnostic model that guided an ongoing understanding of why such measures may be changing; 4) There were no indicators of a brand tied to long-term success of the business that were used to assess a brand's marketing effort; 5) There were no individuals within organisations who were tasked with protecting brand equity and brand managers were evaluated based on short term measures; 6) The measures of performance linked with a brand and its managers were quarterly and yearly. There were no meaningful long-term goals; 7) There were no mechanisms to measure and evaluate the impact of marketing program elements upon a brand; and 8) There were no long-term strategies for a brand. Longterm questions linked to brand associations, product class, and what mental image brands should stimulate were not addressed.

In his ideas on the importance of a brand name, Aaker (1991) argues that the most crucial assets of a firm are intangible in that they are not capitalised and thus do not appear on balance sheets. One such intangible asset is the equity represented by a brand name. He adds that for many organisations, the brand name and what it represents is the most essential asset, thus, it is the basis of competitive advantage and future earning streams. In this light, Meyerson (2022) asserts that when creating brand names, organisations should be strategic. Specifically, they should ensure that it is: 1) meaningful—it sends the intended message and evokes the right feelings; 2) adaptable—it is able to be flexible and accommodate foreseeable changes in the brand; and 3) distinctive—it is able to distinguish itself from competitors.

Aaker (1991) notes that a focus on short-run issues facing a brand can result in an operation that performs well, sometimes over a long time-period. However, the danger is that this performance is gained by leveraging the brand and allowing it to deteriorate. Additionally, he postulates that avoiding brand damage is not sufficient—it needs to be nurtured and maintained. A more subtle danger facing a brand is from a firm with

a strong cost/efficiency culture. Aaker states that the problem with such a culture is that the brand may not be nurtured, and thus may slowly deteriorate. Stengel et al. (2023) acknowledge that marketing practitioners are often concerned that performance marketing and its focus on short-term sales is over-powering brand-building activities aimed at enhancing customer brand perceptions—and is working against brand strategy. They suggest that firms should use brand equity to measure the effects of both the performance of brand building and performance marketing efforts. In doing so, organisations are able to make decisions that strengthen the financial contributions of both and get them working together. Stengel et al. (2023) note that "Pitting brand building and performance marketing against each other in a competition for budget unnecessarily damages the effectiveness of both" (para. 4). They recommend the following four ways of measuring brand equity: 1) Familiarity—the extent to which consumers feel they know and understand a brand, beyond just being aware of its existence; 2) Regard—how much consumers love and respect a brand; 3) Meaning the relevance that consumers perceive a brand has to their lives; and 4) Uniqueness the differentiation that consumers see in a brand.

3.3.1.1. Aaker's brand equity model

Aaker (1991) re-iterates that for assets or liabilities to underlie brand equity, they must be related to the name and/or symbol of the brand. If the brand name should change, some or all of the assets or liabilities could be impacted and lost, although some might be moved to a new name and symbol. Furthermore, he notes that the assets and liabilities on which brand equity is grounded can be usefully assembled into the following categories (see figure 12): brand loyalty, name awareness, perceived quality, brand associations and other proprietary assets—patents, trademarks, channel relationships, etc. He postulates that the following two results arise from brand equity:

1) Value to the customer—brand equity helps consumers interpret, process, and compile large quantities of information about products and brands. In addition it affects consumers' confidence in the purchase decision (because of either past-use experience or familiarity with the brand and its characteristics). Moreover, brand equity is crucial as perceived quality and brand associations can enhance customers' satisfaction with the use experience; and 2) Value to the firm—brand equity has the

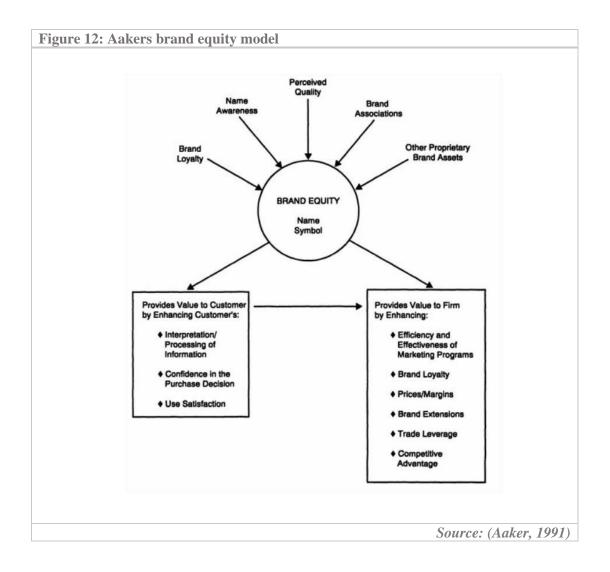
potential to add value for the firm by generating marginal cash flow in the following six ways:

- 1. It can improve programs to attract new consumers or recapture old ones.
- 2. The name awareness, perceived quality, brand associations and other proprietary brand assets can enhance brand loyalty. Brand loyalty is both one of the dimensions and is affected by brand equity.
- 3. Brand equity will usually allow higher margins by allowing both premium pricing and reduced dependence on promotions.
- 4. Brand equity can provide a platform for growth through brand extensions.
- 5. Brand equity can provide leverage in the distribution channel. A powerful brand will have an advantage in gaining shelf facings and collaboration in implementing marketing campaigns.
- 6. Brand assets provide a competitive advantage that frequently offer a real barrier to competitors.

The five asset categories that form the basis of brand equity are discussed by Aaker (1991) as follows:

- 1. Brand loyalty—for organisations, it is costly to gain customers and relatively inexpensive to keep existing ones, especially when existing customers are satisfied with or love the brand (Aaker, 1991). Some existing customers provide brand exposure and reassurance to new customers. Little (2022) notes that brand loyalty is one of the few sustainable sources of competitive advantage and without it, an organisation has to rely fully on its advertising budget for new consumers. She adds that brand loyalty is self-reinforcing—loyal customers often recommend the brand to friends and family.
- 2. Awareness of brand name and symbols—consumers will often purchase a familiar brand because they are comfortable with the familiar. Or they may have the assumption that a familiar brand is probably reliable, in the market to stay, and of reasonable quality. A recognised brand will thus frequently be selected over an unknown brand (Aaker, 1991). Jallad (2019) defines brand familiarity as the process of developing brand presence by providing awareness, emotional connection, value, accessibility and relevant differentiation for consumers. She notes that consumers go through six

- different stages before they make a first purchase: pre-awareness, awareness, research and familiarity, shopping and consideration, and advocacy.
- 3. Perceived quality—a brand that will have associated with it a perception of overall quality not necessarily based on knowledge of detailed specifications. Perceived quality will directly affect purchase decisions and brand loyalty, especially when a consumer is not motivated or able to conduct a detailed evaluation. Perceived quality can be the base for a brand extension. If a brand is well-respected in one context, the assumption will be that it will be of high quality in a related context (Aaker, 1991).
- 4. A set of associations—the value of a brand is frequently based upon specific associations linked to it. A strong association may be the basis of a brand extension. If a brand is well positioned based on a crucial attribute in the product class (such as service backup or technological superiority), competitors will find it difficult to compete based on superiority (Aaker, 1991). Thellefsen and Sørensen (2015) assert the following three remarks about brand associations: a) The creator of a brand communicates a brand to a brand community; b) A brand epitomises several associations of interest towards the brand creator; and c) The associations of interest towards the brand cause several associations of resemblance, contiguity, and interest in the brand users.
- 5. Other propriety brand assets—these signify brand assets such as patents, trademarks, and channel relationships. A trademark will protect brand equity from competitors who might want to mislead consumers by using a similar name, symbol, or package. A patent if robust and relevant to consumer choice, can prevent direct competition. In addition, a brand can control a distribution channel because of the history of a brand's performance (Aaker, 1991). Orhangazi (2019) notes that intangibles such as brand names, trademarks, patents, and copyrights play a role in broadening the profit investment gap. In this way, the use of these assets enables firms to grow market power and profitability without necessarily creating a corresponding increase in fixed capital investment.



3.3.1.2. The value of a brand

Aaker (2022) differentiates between brand equity and brand value. He asserts that brand equity is the significance of a brand in the customers' eyes, whereas brand value is the financial significance a brand carries. Specifically, Aaker (2022) emphasises that brand equity is a set of assets or liabilities in the form of brand visibility, brand associations and customer loyalty that add or subtract from the value of a current or potential product or service driven by the brand. He adds that it is the financial worth of the brand, therefore, to determine brand value, firms need to evaluate how much the brand is worth in the market—how much it would cost to buy the brand.

Aaker (1991) notes that creating approaches to placing a value on a brand is crucial for a number of reasons: 1) It is a practical issue because brands are bought and sold thus, both buyers and sellers evaluate the value of brands; 2) Investments in brands so as to improve brand equity need to be rationalised because there are always competing

uses of funds—an underlying justification is that investment will improve the value of a brand; and 3) The valuation issue offers additional understanding of the brand equity concept. Erskine (2017) asserts that brand valuation deliberations can lead to multibillion-dollar decisions. Lee (2017) as cited in Erskine (2017) contends that brand managers need to know how much a brand contributes to the financial success of their firms. He adds that if they experience difficulty in determining whether brand equity is improving, and to what degree, they will experience comprehending which branding and marketing efforts are effective. Moreover, he postulates that brand valuations are not fully leveraging data from online communities, which is an issue given how much consumer-brand relationships exist online. Lack of attention to this data is ignoring a significant part of the brand valuation issue.

In this sense, Aaker (1991) notes that there are five general approaches to assessing the value of brand equity:

1. Price premiums generated by the brand name—brand equity assets such as name awareness, perceived quality, associations, and loyalty all have the potential to provide a brand with a price premium. The additional revenue earned can be used to improve profits, or to reinvest in building more equity (Aaker, 1991). According to the Cambridge Dictionary (2023), price premium is a high price for something that is of high quality, unusual, or difficult to acquire. In their study on determinants and outcomes of price premium and loyalty in the food industry, Gómez et al. (2018) found that product positioning is a strong determinant of price premium. Moreover, they note that price premium has an effect on loyalty and the consequences of price premium and loyalty propose a positive and significant relationship with word of mouth. Brand experience affects consumers' willingness to pay (WTP) a price premium directly as well as indirectly through brand credibility and perceived uniqueness. Dwivedi et al. (2018) contend that "when consumers derive personally fulfilling experiences with a brand, they will likely pay a price premium for that brand in the future" (p. 101). Thus, a positive brand experience will improve the chances for consumers to pay a higher price. In their study on brand experience and consumers' willingness to pay a price premium in the automobile industry, they found that brand experience directly affects price premium, and brand credibility and perceived uniqueness partially mediate the relationship between brand experience and price premium. Their study also suggests that creating a rich brand experience at various consumer touch points has the potential to improve long-run profitability through price premium. Moreover, building brand credibility and uniqueness is an effective way to attract customers, which in turn also makes it easier for consumers to justify paying a higher price for the brand experience.

- 2. Brand name and customer preference—this is the customer's assessment of the brand based on preference, attitude and intent to purchase (Aaker, 1991). In their study on the impact of brand names on consumer preference in the fashion industry, Bhattacharjee et al. (2012) found that a brand name can strengthen buyer preference. Additionally, their study suggests that a brand name has influence on consumers' decision making in terms of product usefulness and consumers create an identity through branded products. Bresciani and Del Ponte (2017) studied new brand logo design in the context of customers' preference for a brand name and icon. They found that logos composed of an icon plus a brand name are perceived as significantly more attractive than logos made of one component only, and that black logos are perceived as more attractive than coloured logos. Specifically, their study finds that customers describe and differentiate unfamiliar logos according to two main logo characteristics: a) the composition of brand logo elements (brand icon only, brand name only or both); and b) logo colour (black or coloured). Additionally, their study confirms that these two logo characteristics are relevant for defining logos' attractiveness. Moreover, unknown logos composed of a brand icon plus a brand name are perceived as significantly more attractive in comparison to logos composed by a brand icon or by a brand name alone, and black logos are perceived as significantly more attractive compared to coloured logos.
- 3. Replacement cost—this is the cost of developing a comparable name and business (Aaker, 1991). Beise-Zee (2022) notes that when an organisation is divested, brand equity must be transferred from an established brand name to a new brand name. In his study on brand equity retention after rebranding, he found that perceived continuation of the 'spin-off's' intangible, tangible, and relational resources as the primary condition under which the 'spin-off' retains

the brand equity associated with the former parent organisation's corporate brand name. Additionally, they note that a rebranded brand entity can retain brand equity to the degree to which it can credibly show that its resources and capabilities have been preserved during an ownership transfer or any other organisational change. They define a corporate 'spin off' as "the separation of a subsidiary or division together with its assets from a parent company under a renamed corporate entity" (p. 212).

4. Brand value based on stock price movements—this approach begins with the market value of an organisation, which is a function of the stock price and the number of shares. The replacement costs of the tangible assets (such as plant and equipment, inventories and cash) are subtracted. The balance, intangible assets is divided into three components: a) the value of brand equity; b) the value of non-brand factors (such as patents, and research and development), and the value of industry factors (such as regulation and concentration). Aaker (2015) asserts that on average, brand equity is crucial to an organisation because it enhances brand value through impact on stock return for brands.

Aaker (2015) contends that brands are crucial, however, their value is difficult to quantify. It needs different time periods and/or varying markets in which brand equity has experienced significant change. Those contexts are not often easily encountered.

3.3.1.3. Brand loyalty

Aaker (1991) notes that the brand loyalty of a customer base is often central to a brand's equity. He adds that if consumers are not interested in the brand and, in fact, purchase with regard to features, price, and convenience with little concern to the brand name, there is possibly little equity. On the contrary, if they continue to buy the brand even in the face of competitors with superior features, price, and convenience, significant value exists in the brand and perhaps in its symbol and slogans. Aaker (2013) asserts that brand loyalty is part of a road map for building brand equity. In this way, he suggests that brand equity enables: 1) reduced marketing costs; 2) trade leverage; 3) attracting of new customers via awareness and reassurance; and 4) time to respond to competitive threats. In football, Rahman et al. (2023) investigated the determinants of football fan loyalty. They found that football fan loyalty behaviours

are determined by fan-ship and cumulative satisfaction with the team. Thus, football fans displaying greater fan-ship and cumulative satisfaction levels are likely to attend more games in person or watch them on TV, spend longer periods of time socialising with fans during or after a game, and purchasing club merchandise.

In their study on the mediating impact of airlines' image in relation to corporate social responsibility and customers' loyalty, Thanh and Anh (2023) found that corporate social responsibility had a positive influence on corporate image and customer loyalty. Additionally, corporate social responsibility impacts customer loyalty by improving corporate image. They also found that: 1) economic responsibility has no direct effect on customer loyalty but has a direct and positive impact on corporate image; 2) social responsibility, environmental responsibility, and safety responsibility have a positive effect on customer loyalty; 3) corporate image has a positive impact on customer loyalty; and 4) corporate image fully mediated the relationship between economic responsibility and customer loyalty, and partially mediated the impact of social responsibility, environmental responsibility, and safety responsibility towards customer loyalty.

In e-commerce, Tan and Le (2023) postulate that comprehending the mechanism that develops consumer repeat purchase intent is crucial for business survival. They conducted a study on the influence of perceived price and quality of delivery on online repeat purchase intention and found that perceived value directly impacts repeat purchase intention. In addition, through satisfaction perceived value directly affects repeat purchase intention. Thus, they recommend that online stores should focus on order processing time, packaging time and liaise with shipping companies to improve delivery quality. Additionally, they suggest that online stores should have suitable pricing policies to improve perceived value and create repeat purchase intentions. On the same wavelength, of perceived value, Akoglu and Özbek (2022) studied the effect of brand experiences on brand loyalty through perceived quality and brand trust with regard to sports consumers. They found that brand experience has a positive direct impact on perceived quality. Additionally, they found that perceived quality plays a vital intermediary role that manages the relationship between customers' brand experience and brand loyalty.

In their study on the impact of brand communities on public and private brand loyalty in a professional sports context, Mills et al. (2022) found that consumers' brand

community identification has a significant direct relationship with both public and private brand loyalty. They suggest that brand community identification is linked to both private and public brand loyalty at potentially varying levels. Additionally, they contend that by engaging in rituals and traditions, sports fans wear replica jerseys of players that are from their club's history and in many cases, fans of sports teams wear replica jerseys of players that retired long before they were even born. They explain that this public display of brand loyalty enables them to showcase their brand community membership and, to a degree, demonstrate their seniority within the group. They thus recommend that comprehending the expected norms, values, and behaviours of brand communities will enable marketers to proactively facilitate the development and display of rituals and traditions. These rituals and traditions will further improve the consumers' brand community identification and generate higher levels of public brand loyalty.

Shezi and Redda (2022) conducted a study on the determinants of brand loyalty of sports footwear brands in South Africa. Of the nine variables they researched, six variables namely: 1) brand image; 2) brand association; 3) style; 4) brand name; 5) price; and 6) endorsement were found to have a statistically significant impact on Generation Y consumers' brand loyalty toward sports footwear, while three variables namely: 1) perceived quality; 2) comfort; and 3) style were not found to be statistically significant predictors of brand loyalty. They recommend that it is crucial for manufacturers and marketers of sports footwear brands to comprehend factors that contribute to brand loyalty of their sports footwear brands. This will provide them with insight so they can know what to feature in their products during the production stage and how to develop marketing strategies geared towards the Generation Y market. In their study on the impact of brand associations on brand loyalty in the football industry within the context of developed and emerging football markets, Maderer et al. (2016) found that there was a negative effect of brand attributes on attitudinal loyalty, whereas brand benefits positively affect attitudinal loyalty. Sharif and Sulaiman (2019) studied three-dimensional brand loyalty and virtual customer relationships on social mediabased brand communities. They found that the following customer relationships improve cognitive, behavioural and affective brand loyalty: 1) Customer-product relationships; 2) Customer to brand relationships; and 3) Customer to market relationships.

In their research within the fashion industry titled 'No One Is Leaving This Time: Social Media Fashion Brand Communities,' Diachi et al. (2021) note that peer influence and self-disclosure have a positive effect on sustaining consumer engagement in social media fashion brand communities. In addition, self-disclosure mediates the relationship between peer influence and sustaining consumer engagement, and consumer engagement nurtures loyalty to social media brand communities. Akoglu and Özbek (2022) studied the effect of brand experience on brand loyalty through perceived quality and brand trust with a focus on sports consumers. They assert that brand experience has a positive direct effect on perceived quality, brand trust, and brand loyalty. Furthermore, perceived quality and brand trust have crucial intermediary roles that manage the relationship between customers' brand experience and brand loyalty. Additionally, they note that consumers who are loyal to a brand are less responsive to competitive moves, remain loyal to the brand, and are even willing to pay higher prices for brands. Thus, a brand that has strong brand trust affects brand loyalty.

Williams et al. (2021) studied the influence of logo change on brand loyalty and the role of attitude toward rebranding and logo evaluation in the sports industry. They found that attitude toward rebranding plays an important role in fan response when sport rebranding happens. In addition, their findings suggest that logo evaluation partially mediates the relationship between logo change and brand loyalty. They also note that fans with negative attitudes toward rebranding will be more likely to evaluate a new logo, while fans with a positive attitude toward rebranding will not go through a process of logo evaluation when sport rebranding occurs.

In their study on the role of customer perceived value and product quality in building brand loyalty in the sports drink industry, Kaewkhav et al. (2023) found that generating awareness about product value, quality, and customer satisfaction leads to a positive brand perception, increased repeat purchases, and word-of-mouth referrals. Thus, they recommend that business managers and marketers in the sport drink industry should focus on promoting product value and quality to enhance brand perception. Bisen and Nuangjamnong (2021) studied the effects of advertising on consumer-based brand loyalty using a sports shoe brand as a case study. Their study revealed that advertising has a significant impact on brand trust and perceived quality, while perceived quality has a significant effect on brand trust and brand loyalty. They

suggest that customers are likely to be loyal to a good quality sports shoe and its design, which can reflect customer satisfaction and a positive experience with the sports shoe's brand. In this light, Aaker (1991) notes that brand loyalty is qualitatively different from the other major dimensions of brand equity as it is heavily linked to the use experience. Brand loyalty cannot occur without prior purchase and user experience. In contrast, awareness, associations, and perceived quality are characteristics of many brands that a person has never used. However, one of the major dimensions of brand equity that affects brand loyalty is brand awareness.

3.3.1.4. Brand awareness

Aaker (1991) defines brand awareness as the ability of a potential consumer to recognise or recall that a brand is a member of a certain product category. He adds that a relationship between product class and brand is involved. As part of the roadmap for building and managing brand equity, Aaker (2013) asserts the following points about brand awareness: 1) It is an anchor to which other associations can be attached; 2) It builds familiarity which leads to liking; 3) It creates visibility that helps gain consideration; and 4) It acts as a signal of substance/commitment.

In their study on millennials' purchasing behaviour toward fashion clothing brands, Rahman et al. (2021) found that brand awareness has a mediating effect on millennials' purchasing behaviour. Mulei and Muchemi (2021) studied brand awareness through sports sponsorship. They found that sponsorship as a method of creating brand awareness tends to: 1) positively impact lives of the people in a community; 2) give emotional connections that other methods do not offer; 3) create positive public relations and raise awareness of the organisation as a whole; 4) provide attractive content for organisations' products and services; 5) builds brand positioning through associative imagery; 6) creates internal emotional commitment to the brand; and 7) acts as a corporate hospitality that endorses positive relations with clients. Górecka (2020) notes that football sponsorship enables firms to raise both brand awareness and profits as well as enter new markets. However, using Nike's kit sponsorship of the Indonesian national football team as a case study, Magdalena and Dharmanto (2020) studied the effect of sponsorship and customer engagement programs in improving brand awareness, and found that sponsorship has no significant effect on Nike's brand awareness. Furthermore, they note that it is customer

engagement programs that have a significantly positive effect on Nike's brand awareness. They add that the better the customer engagement programs, the more fans will show an interest in Nike. Additionally, sponsorship in sports as an effort to create brand awareness has faced some challenges. The Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel, PACBI (2019), used the hashtag #BoycottPuma, a sportswear manufacturer for its sponsorship of the Israel Football Association (IFA), which represents teams in Israeli settlements on Palestinian land. In his study titled 'Giving Puma the boot—A case study of a contemporary football boycott,' Dart (2023) asserts that Puma's brand has been built on creating a specific type of brand image, with a positive brand image and brand awareness being vital for the sportswear company. Thus, if the company finds itself under the media's negative spotlight their brand equity can be damaged.

Haapalainen (2022) studied growing the fan base internationally through brand awareness and engagement using the NHL (National Hockey League) organisations in Europe as cases. He concludes that the most crucial aspect in international sports brand management is understanding the brand's core and creating a brand message around identity and a personality that communicates authenticity. Räihä (2022) studied increasing brand awareness of a new sport using Discmania, a disc golfing company as a case. He found that to increase brand awareness young sports organisations such as Discmania should focus on creating high-quality content on social media. Specifically, this improves brand awareness, and consumer engagement. He also notes that to increase brand awareness in new markets, driving word of mouth, and consumer generated content are valuable for such organisations. In their study on effects of social media marketing on brand equity, Mohammadi and Zarei (2020) found that social media marketing predicts how the brand awareness and brand image of football clubs will change. Additionally, they found that brand awareness has a positive effect on word-of-mouth advertising and brand commitment. Thus, they recommend that the power of social media, if applied in conjunction with a welldesigned framework, will be highly effective in terms of services provided to fans and income generated for the football club.

Beek and Derom (2023) studied the impact of brand equity among fan profiles with regard to organisations' sponsorship of the UEFA Champions League, a top tier European football league. They found that there are growing patterns on sponsorship

awareness of official sponsors. However, this increased sponsorship awareness has a saturation level whereby, sponsorship awareness remains stable over time. Regardless, in their study on evaluating the effectiveness of sports sponsorship among football fans in Ethiopia, Girma (2020) found that brand awareness as a commercial objective was created and increased amongst football fans. Gunawan and Susilo (2021) studied the impact of Cristiano Ronaldo's appeal as a brand ambassador of Shopee, a consumer-to-consumer e-commerce site in Indonesia. They note that the appeal of Cristiano Ronaldo has a significant and positive impact on Shopee's brand awareness. Considering brand awareness as part of a brand, Majewski (2021) proposes that football players can be identified as a brand which significantly affects clubs and their budgets. In addition, he suggests that it is possible to determine which players will become the most recognisable brands and thus generate profits. Furthermore, through his study on football players' brand as a factor in performance rights valuation, he notes that attackers (offensive players) are often the most recognisable amongst football fans and non-football fans. According to his study, the most important playerbrands in European football at the time were offensive players such as Lionel Messi, Neymar, Cristiano Ronaldo, Luis Suarez, Gareth Bale, Antoine Griezmann, Robert Lewandoski and Gonzalo Higuaín.

Joanna and Zuzanna (2020) assert that brand awareness is the basis for building its image in the environment in which it operates. Additionally, they note that social media plays a crucial role in managing the image of a sports brand. In their study on the impact of social media on managing the image of the Polish national football team, they found that commercialisation of sport has caused the Polish national football team to become a brand that triggers positive emotions. Furthermore, the team's association on YouTube is involved in the quality of their brand image management.

In her study on global marketing strategy in professional football club using Bayern Munich, a top tier football club from Germany, Baena (2019) notes that the football club utilises website and social media development to raise brand awareness and fan commitment. Additionally, she asserts that as a result of this, Bayern Munich preserves close links with a large network of official fan and supporter groups, being the only German club that vaunts a large number of fan clubs. Specifically, she asserts that there are more than four thousand Bayern Munich fan clubs registered globally. Moreover, she found that updating fans through the website and social networks, and

collaborating in charitable initiatives, may help in enhancing the club's brand awareness and the bonds between the club and the fans. Massi et al. (2019) notes that football clubs are creating museums and using them as brand platforms. In their study on boosting football club brands through museums, the experience of Mondo Milan, they found that football club museums present clubs with an opportunity for: 1) generating revenue; 2) attracting new market segments, which can interact with club history and values; and 3) improving their brand awareness and image.

3.3.1.5. Perceived quality

Aaker (1991) defines perceived quality as the customer's perception of the overall quality of superiority of a product or service with respect to its intended purpose, relative to alternatives. He notes that perceived quality is initially a perception by customers and differentiates it from some related concepts such as: 1) actual or objective quality, which is the extent to which the product or service delivers superior service; 2) product-based quality, which is the nature and quantity of ingredients, features, or services included; and 3) manufacturing quality, which is conformance to specification. In addition, he asserts that perceived quality cannot be objectively determined, partly because it is a perception, and because it involves judgements about what is important to consumers. In relation to building and managing brand equity, Aaker (2013) explains that perceived quality: 1) helps in dissemination of information; 2) differentiates or positions a brand; 3) provides reasons-to-buy from a brand; 4) creates positive attitudes and feelings; and 5) forms the basis for brand extensions. Table 18 highlights the characteristics of perceived quality.

Table 18: Characteristics of perceived quality

- 1. Perceived quality is defined relative to an intended purpose and set of alternatives.
- 2. Perceived quality is different from satisfaction A customer can be satisfied because he or she had low expectations about the performance level. High perceived quality is not consistent with low expectations.
- 3. Perceived quality is different from attitude A positive attitude could be created because a product of inferior quality is very inexpensive. In contrast, an individual could have a negative attitude toward a high-quality product that is overpriced.
- **4.** Perceived quality is an intangible overall feeling about a brand. However, it usually will be based on underlying dimensions, which include characteristics of the products to which the brand is linked to such as reliability and performance. To understand perceived quality, the identification and measurement of the underlying dimensions will be useful, but the perceived quality itself is a summary, a global construct.

Adapted from Aaker (1991)

Aaker (1991) asserts that if perceived quality is to be understood and maintained, it is mandatory to consider what influences it. He adds that the dimensions which form the basis of perceived quality judgement will depend upon the context. In the product context, he endorses a Harvard Business Review article by Garvin (1987) who notes that high quality means making consumers happy and not just shielding them from annoyances. Thus, Garvin (1987) proposes eight critical dimensions or categories of quality:

- 1. Performance—This refers to a product's primary operating characteristics (Garvin, 1987). With regard to financial performance of football clubs, Deloitte (2023) notes that in the 2021/22 season, EPL clubs' revenue increased by 12% (£586 million). Moreover, in the same season, Arsenal recorded £368 million in revenue and £212 million in wage costs. In relation to non-financial performance such as on-field performance, EPL table positions in the 2022/23 season, and quality of football, Premier League (2023) states that Arsenal finished the EPL season 2023/24 in second place with 89 points.
- 2. Features—These are the characteristics of supplement in a product's basic functioning. The line separating primary performance characteristics from secondary features is often difficult to outline. What is important, is that features involve objective and measurable attributes. Moreover, objective individual needs, not prejudices, affect their translation into quality differences (Garvin, 1987). In football, stadiums and club merchandise such as jerseys may be viewed as football club features. Doyle and Martin (2023) note that what some football stadiums lack in stature, they replace with noise. However some football clubs boast a combination of deafening crowd noise and stunning choreography. They add that Liverpool's home stadium Anfield has a pattern of intimidating opposing teams because of the wall of noise from Liverpool fans. With regard to jerseys as brand features, for the season 2022/23, Arsenal (2023) in collaboration with Adidas their kit sponsor, unveiled their third kit, which celebrated retro fashion from the 1980s. Accompanying this kit launch was a short film that involved some of their players modelling the jersey in creative ways. On YouTube, this film has garnered over 200,000 views (Arsenal, 2023).

- 3. Reliability—This dimension mirrors the probability of a product malfunctioning or failing within a specified time period. Among the most known measures of reliability are the mean time to first failure. Because these measures require a product to be in use for a specified period, they are more relevant to durable foods than to products and services that are consumed instantly (Garvin, 1987). Aaker (1991, p. 86) refers to this as the 'up time,' which is the percentage of time the product delivers an acceptable performance. To ensure high quality standards Adidas (2023), which is Arsenal's kit sponsor take the following measures: 1) Company-wide product safety policies in place that ensure they consistently apply physical, chemical product safety and conformity standards across all brands of the company; 2) Ensuring that all materials and product samples pass a rigid compliance process, and are tested in accordance with standardised material, and product testing specifications and procedures; and 3) Dedicated teams to monitor the quality of products on all levels of the supply chain through rigorous testing prior to production, close cooperation with suppliers throughout the manufacturing process, random testing after retail delivery, open communication about defective products, and quick settlement of product liability claims when necessary.
- **4. Conformance**—This is the degree to which a product's design and operating characteristics meet established standards (Garvin, 1987). When football club kit sponsors such as Adidas design home kits for Arsenal, they are guided by the established football club colours as a standard. In this regard, Adidas conform to the standard primary home kit colours of red and white when designing kits for Arsenal as depicted in figure 6 in the introduction chapter.
- 5. Durability—Technically, durability can be defined as the amount of use one gets from a product before it deteriorates. Additionally, durability may be defined as the amount of use one gets from a product before it breaks down and a replacement is chosen over continuous repair (Garvin, 1987). Aaker (1991) asserts that durability is the economic life of the product. Generally, football kits are often durable and can last up to 30 years or more. 20 to 30 year old football jerseys are known as classic football shirts and their quality is

- graded as Mint (10), Excellent (9/8), Very Good (7/6), Good (5) or Fair (4/3) (Jamie, 2023).
- 6. Serviceability—This is the speed, courtesy, competence, and ease of repair. Consumers are concerned not only about a product failing over time but also about the time before service is restored, the timeliness with which service appointments are kept, the nature of dealings with service personnel, and the frequency with which service calls or repairs fail to correct outstanding problems (Garvin, 1987). In a football brand context, Arsenal (2023) have policies on product exchanges and damaged or faulty products. They note that they are willing to offer exchanges on clothing items, as long as they are not personalised, should the customer require a different size. With regard to faulty or damaged goods, they offer consumers an exchange or a refund.
- 7. Aesthetics—This refers to how the product looks, feels, sounds, tastes, or smells as a matter of personal judgement and a reflection of individual preference (Garvin, 1987). Borge et al. (2015) assert that one specific function of football and football clubs is the aesthetic dimension offered by the game. They add that generally, football in particular is a neighbouring spectacle of the arts. When it is written and talked about, questions related to aesthetic properties and judgement are typically aroused. They assert that phrases such as 'beautiful play,' and 'ugly style,' are widely used in football criticism and discussion.

Aaker (1991) acknowledges the importance achieving high quality however, he emphasises that this is not enough. Thus, it is mandatory for actual quality to be translated into perceived quality. He adds that in many situations, the dimensions of quality that are most important are also the most difficult to judge. For football fans, strategies that are used to judge the authenticity (part of quality) of a shirt are: 1) checking manufacturer product codes for the season: 2) locating the washing label inside the shirt: 3) identifying the unique product code amongst the many different numbers: 4) searching for the product code to confirm whether results match the shirt's product code: and 5) inspecting the inner stitching of the shirt (Classic football kits, 2023). Nevertheless, Aaker (1991) asserts that for many consumers, the time and labour necessary for judging quality could be a barrier. Thus, he proposes that firms should have a signal for dimensions of quality. He terms some of these signals or brand

associations as extrinsic cues that can influence perceived quality. Such cues include the brand name, or the price. In this light and in respect to another industry, within the online context of hotel booking, Kim (2021) notes that online reviews might serve as a product quality signal, and subsequently, consumers might incorporate less online review information into decision making if other product information cues such as expert ratings or brands help in product quality verification. Regardless, Aaker (1991) asserts that price can be an important quality cue. He adds that significance of price as a quality cue will be reliant on other cues available, the individual, and the product involved. If a consumer lacks the ability or motivation to assess the quality of a product, price will be applicable.

3.3.1.6. Brand associations

Aaker (1991) defines brand associations as "anything linked in memory to a brand" (p. 101). He notes that the association has a level of strength, and a link to a brand will be stronger when it is rooted in many experiences or exposures to communications, rather than a few. It will also be stronger when it is reinforced by a network of other links. In writing about how brand equity dimensions provide value to a brand, Aaker (2013) asserts that brand associations (including perceived quality): 1) help communicate information; 2) differentiate/position brands; 3) give consumers a reason to buy; 4) create positive attitude/feelings; and 5) form a basis for extensions. In the sports apparel industry, Lin (2017) contends that the core of building brand equity for Nike is brand association. These associations include: 1) innovative technology; 2) high quality/stylish products; 3) joy and celebration of sports, maximum performance and self-empowerment; and 4) inspiring and geological involvement. Additionally, Nike associates its brand with famous sports celebrities who have similar personality traits as the brand. These traits include: 1) high achievers; 2) winners; and 3) being non-traditional. In football, Yildiz (2016) conducted research on football teams' brand associations. He found that success, social interaction, and brand marks are the most important brand association dimensions for soccer teams.

Withal, Aaker (1991) asserts that a brand image is a group of associations, often organised in some meaningful way. Na et al. (2020) conducted research on exploring athlete brand image development on social media. They note that sport consumers have more favourable attitudes towards athlete content on social media when it is

showcased by an indirect source. Moreover, this content is seen as credible and less biased than when the same information is sent from the athlete directly. Thus, consumers' intentions to engage with athlete-related social media content is greater when athlete-related content is shared by an indirect source. Reciprocally, in their research on drivers of football fan loyalty, Yun et al. (2020) found that fan engagement affects both team brand image and cumulative fan satisfaction, while team brand image also influences cumulative fan satisfaction, and both brand image and fan satisfaction affect attitudinal loyalty and behavioural loyalty.

Aaker (1991) notes that an association and an image both represent perceptions which may or may not depict objective reality. In an effort to associate the Arsenal brand with European fashion, in the team's third kit launch, Arsenal (2023) had the brand motto 'Europe's never looked so good.' However, geographically, Arsenal are located in London England, which is in the UK, and according to the European Commission (2023), the UK left the European Union on 31 January 2020. With regard to positioning, Aaker (1991) notes that a well-positioned brand will have a competitively attractive position upheld by strong associations. It will have a high ranking on a desirable attribute. In this light, Andrews (2015) asserts that professional football clubs in Europe are ubiquitous. Every small to medium sized city has one. He adds that football clubs like Barcelona, Bayern Munich or Manchester United are among 'super clubs' of Europe because they win more games, attract more supporters, and earn more revenue than other clubs. Conversely, clubs such as Everton do not position themselves as, nor associate themselves with 'super clubs'. Beesley (2019) notes that Everton's manager David Moyes, referred to Everton as 'the people's club' because on his way to his first press conference, children on the streets of Liverpool were playing football wearing Everton football kits. In this regard, Everton (2023) have incorporated this name in their branding activities and thus have a People's club lounge in their stadium, Goodison Park.

With regard to types of associations, Aaker (1991) postulates that a brand manager, will not be equally concerned with all associations. Instead, he or she will be primarily interested in those associations that directly or indirectly influence buying behaviour. Thus, management's concern is not only with the identity of brand associations but also whether they are strong and shared by many, or weak and vary from one individual to another. He presents the following eleven types of associations: 1)

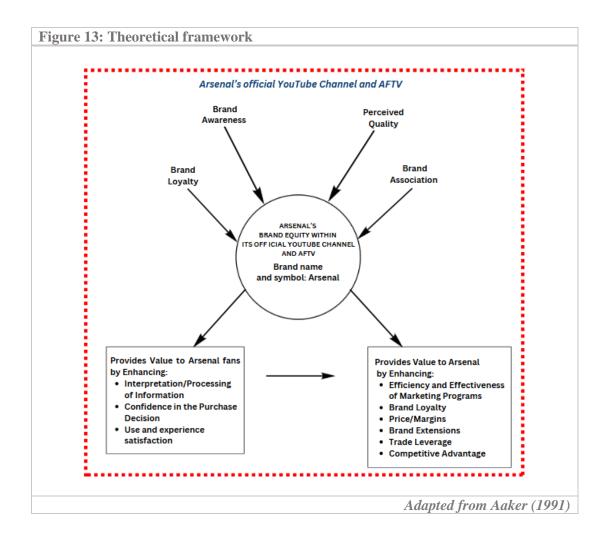
Product attributes; 2) Intangibles; 3) Customer benefits; 4) Relative price, 5) Use/application; 6) User/customer; 7) Celebrity/person; 8) Life-style/personality; 9) Product class; 10) Competitors; and 11) Country/geographic area.

3.4. Literature gaps

Hikichi (2023) conducted a netnography on the impact of social media in building brand equity. She recommends that there is interest in exploring whether social media sites such as YouTube, which emphasise video footage over words play a role in influencing the brand equity of an organisation. In their study on the influence of social media communication on brand equity, Grubor et al. (2017) found that firm-generated social media communication positively affects all the brand equity dimensions, and user-generated social media communication negatively impacts perceived quality and behavioural quality. Regardless, they assert that there is room for widening research on social media communication and brand equity. In their research on drivers of fan loyalty, Yun et al. (2020) note that there is a gap in sport-marketing research in relation to what contributes to fan loyalty. Zhang and Patrick (2021) studied brand relationship quality-indicating cues such as brand nicknames and note that they enhance perceived information authenticity in online communication. They add that the use of brand nicknames in the marketplace is broad and nuanced, thus, current research does not fully address every aspect of the use of brand nicknames. They recommend that future research, therefore, could: 1) investigate how brand attachment cues can affect aspects of consumers' information processing; 2) explore how to strategically utilise brand attachment cues without exaggeration—this is because brand nicknames are relatively subtle linguistic cues in the way in which they signal brand attachment; and 3) study potential moderators that could enable firms to benefit from using their nicknames in firm-generated social media content. Considering the foregoing, it may be worth noting that one of Arsenal's nicknames is 'the Gunners' (Goal, 2020). With regard to the methodology of key research reviewed in this chapter, a comparative table— Appendix 2 (Methodology of the key research reviewed in chapter 3 [Brand Equity]) provides a comprehensive analysis. From Appendix 2, we can deduce that netnographic studies about brand equity and football are limited in comparison to other quantitative and qualitative studies in this area. Thus, this study aims to contribute towards netnographic research on brand equity and football.

3.5. Theoretical framework

Kivunja (2018) notes that a theoretical framework is a synthesis of the thoughts of giants in an area of research in relation to a proposed research or thesis. It comprises of what leaders in a particular research field assert about a research question, a problem under consideration for research, and might include suggestions of how to solve the problem, including how to interpret research findings. Concerning the importance of a theoretical framework, he asserts the following: 1) It provides a structure for what to look for in data; 2) It provides a structure on how to interpret data; 3) It enables a clear discussion of findings in relation to what existing theories imply; and 4) It enables a linkage of connections between the abstract, and concrete elements of data observation. For Varpio et al. (2020), a theoretical framework "is a reflection of the work the researcher engages in to use a theory in a given study" (p. 990). In consideration of the foregoing, the theoretical framework of this research is based on adapting Aaker (1991) brand equity model as illustrated in figure 13 in the context of Arsenal's official YouTube channel and AFTV. In this sense, it implies that Arsenal's brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand association lead to Arsenal's brand equity. Arsenal's brand equity thus enables Arsenal to provide value to their fans by enhancing their: 1) interpretation/processing of information; 2) confidence in the purchase decision; and 3) use and experience satisfaction. Furthermore, Arsenal's brand equity enables the football club to provide themselves with value by enhancing: 1) efficiency and effectiveness of marketing programs; 2) brand loyalty; 3) price/margins; 4) brand extensions; 5) trade leverage; and 6) competitive advantage. Additionally, the theoretical framework also suggests that value to Arsenal fans through Arsenal's brand equity leads to value for the Arsenal brand. Additionally, as Kivunja (2018) puts it, adapting Aaker (1991) brand equity model as a theoretical framework of this study: 1) provides a structure for what to look for in the netnographic data collection of this study; 2) provides a structure on how to interpret netnographic data collected for this study; 3) it enables a clear discussion of findings in relation to what existing SMBC and brand equity literature implies; and 4) it enables a linkage of connections between the abstract, and concrete elements of the netnographic data collection of this study.



3.6. Summary

This chapter has provided an overview of brand equity literature in the context of brand equity eras, SMBCs, and sport. Additionally, it has presented a review of literature concerning Aaker's brand equity concept and dimensions (brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand associations). This chapter has also discussed literature gaps within sport marketing, social media and brand equity research, and offered a theoretical framework based on Aaker's brand equity model. The next chapter entails this study's research methodology.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1. Introduction

This chapter begins by depicting the guiding template of the study's research design, which is a research onion established and meticulously crafted by Saunders et al. (2023). By doing so, the chapter is guided by primarily peeling the onion from its outer layers. It also depicts what the research onion is, and how the study adopts it in research. After this, it delves into a discussion on philosophy in research, and thus showcases the study's philosophical standpoint or philosophical approach to theory development. Additionally, this chapter also highlights various research strategies, and extensively discusses netnography (the chosen research strategy), a research method which was established and continuously refined by Kozinets (2020). It then closes with a depiction of the study's time horizon, techniques and procedures, and concludes with a chapter summary.

4.2. Overview of research methodology

Stokes (2011) postulates that research methodology concerns the philosophy, approach, and general frame of reference a researcher will use to study, analyse, and understand the research field and phenomena that he or she is interested in. Melinkovas (2018) refers to research methodology as a general research strategy which delineates how research should be conducted. It includes a system of beliefs and philosophical assumptions which shape the comprehension of research questions and underpin the selection of research methods. He adds that it is a crucial part of a dissertation or thesis which helps to ensure consistency between selected tools, techniques, and an underlying philosophy. More recently, Rashid (2022) notes that research methodology is a collective term for the structured process of conducting research. There are different methodologies used in various types of research and the term is often considered to include research design, data gathering, and data analysis. It seeks to inform concerns about what particular method has been adopted, and why a particular technique of analysing data has been used. For Alonso-Dos-Santos et al. (2018), the research design and methodology chapter highlights how the research outcome at the end will be obtained in line with meeting a study's research objectives. Moreover, they propose that research methodology is the path through which researchers follow while conducting research. Lê et al. (2019) assert that ultimately, good research does not mean using the most recent and complex methods, but actually: generating interesting research that has congruence between research objectives and methods, offers transparency, and meets quality criteria suitable for the method.

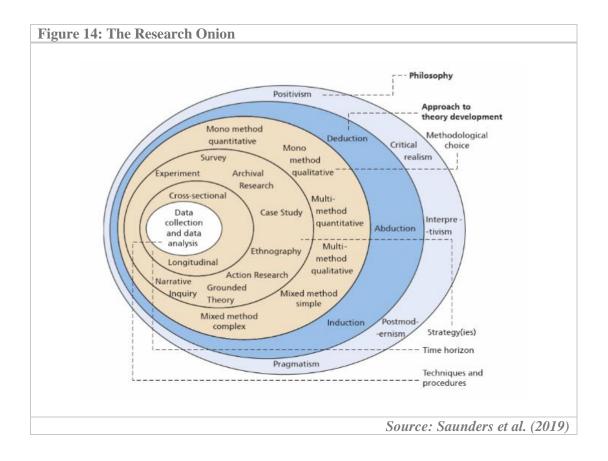
According to Stokes (2011), the research design phase of a piece of research involves making decisions regarding what particular or specific topic is to be examined. He adds that research questions need to be generated and subsequently the researcher needs to make a decision on what methods and methodologies, and theories will be suitable to deal with the questions. More recently, Hassan (2024) refers to a research design as the overall strategy for conducting a research study. It highlights the methods and procedures that will be used to collect and analyse data, as well as the goals and objectives of the study. For him, it is integral because it guides the entire research process and ensures that the study is conducted in a systematic and rigorous style. Thakur (2021) posits that the research design is primary to a research endeavour and functions as a harbour light to guide the study. It is vital because it ensures that a research plan is organised. Selto (2018) argues that a research design is not just a work plan. A work plan showcases what has to be done to finish the project but the work plan will flow from the project's research design. He notes that "The function of a research design is to ensure that the evidence obtained enables us to answer the initial question as unambiguously as possible" (p. 9). Additionally, he explains that obtaining relevant evidence entails specifying the type of evidence required to answer the research question, to test a theory, to evaluate a programme or to accurately describe some phenomenon. In their paper titled 'the layers of research design', Saunders and Tosey (2013) assert that many researchers design a piece of research to answer a question or address a problem. They start by finding out what data are needed and then focus on how they will gain this data. This can involve one or a number of data collection techniques such as questionnaires, interviews, and observations as well as utilising secondary data. However, they argue that selection of technique or techniques used to obtain data, along with procedures to analyse these data, represents only the final decision about the overall research design. Thus, they propose the metaphor "Research onion" (p. 128) to highlight how these final elements (the core of the research onion) need to be considered in relation to other design elements (the outer layers of the research onion).

4.2.1. Research onion

In his article on peeling the layers of the research onion (see figure 14), Sahay (2016) notes that it is the researcher's understanding and associated decisions regarding the outer layers of the research onion that provide the context and boundaries within which data collection techniques, processing of data and analysis should be chosen. According to Melinkovas (2018), the research onion has six main layers:

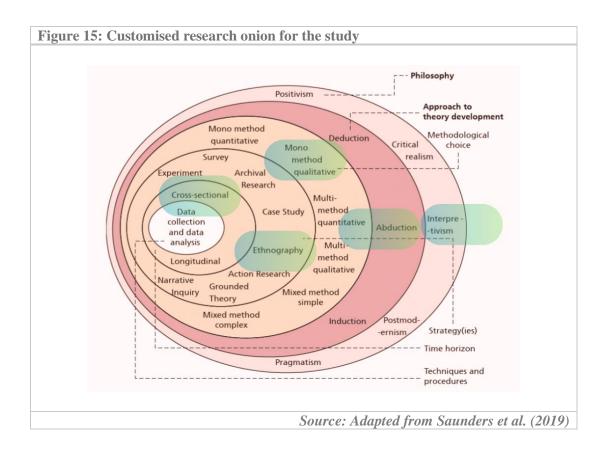
- Research philosophy—This forms the basis of research by delineation of ontology – nature of reality, epistemology – nature, sources of knowledge or facts, and axiology – values, beliefs and ethics of the research (Melinkovas, 2018).
- 2. Approach to theory development—This often includes: a) deduction, where the research begins with an existing theory, then raising a question or hypothesis and data collection in order to confirm or reject the hypothesis; 2) induction, where research begins with observation and data collection, moving to description and analysis in order to develop a theory; 3) abduction, where observation of an empirical phenomena is followed by research, which formulates the best conclusion based on available evidence (Melinkovas, 2018). In his paper on developing a theory in academic research, Dankasa (2015) found that scholars have varying definitions of theory, which lead to using terms such as model, paradigm, framework, and theory interchangeably. He also found that the lack of theoretical constructs in a study is a factor that indicates why research is rejected for publication.
- 3. Methodological choice—This determines the use of qualitative and quantitative data methods or various mixtures of both (Melinkovas, 2018). Zai and Zai (2009) posit that the manner of realisation of the scientific approach (data collection, treatment, analysis, interpretation and generalisation) can be quantitative, qualitative or a combination of both, defining what they label as "scientific research method" (p. 907). For them, quantitative methods suggest an objective approach to reality, with precise techniques and instruments, that lend themselves to general logical judgements in order to gain explanations or testable predictions. In contrast, qualitative methods use interpretation, often subjective, appealing to a naturist description to relations between subjects.

- **4. Strategy**—This involves the instrument to be used for data collection. It can be one or more of the following: a) experiment; b) survey; c) archival research; d) case study; e) ethnography; f) action research; g) grounded theory; and h) narrative enquiry.
- 5. Time horizons—This layer outlines the time frame for research. Cross-sectional time-frames involve the collection of data at a particular point in time. Whereas, longitudinal time-frames involve the collection of data repeatedly over a long period of time for data comparison (Melinkovas, 2018). Simkus (2023) notes that in longitudinal studies, researchers do not manipulate any variables or interfere with the environment. Alternatively, they conduct observations on the same group of subjects over a period of time. On the other hand, cross-sectional studies measure a moment in time, these studies last beyond a single moment, enabling researchers to discover cause-and-effect relationships between variables.
- 6. Techniques and procedures—This includes data collection and analysis where the use of primary/secondary data, choosing sample groups, developing questionnaire content, preparing interviews etc. occurs (Melinkovas, 2018). According to Hassan (2024), research techniques refer to various methods, processes, and tools used to collect, analyse, and interpret data for the purpose of answering research questions or testing hypothesis. He adds that examples of research techniques are literature reviews, surveys, interviews, data analysis, and report writing.



4.2.2. Adapting the research onion

This study adopts Saunders et al. (2019) research onion as a guide for its research design peeling the onion from the outside, moving inwards towards data collection and analysis. Figure 15 presents the customised research onion for this study. The selected elements in the research onion will be extensively discussed further within this chapter. Saunders and Tosey (2013) note that unlike outer layers of an onion, which are simply discarded unnecessary, explicit consideration of these elements is vital to the development of an appropriate and coherent research design, which can be both justified and explained. In writing about the research onion, Tengli (2020) notes that designing a robust research methodology is crucial because its answers to research questions are valid and reliable if they are answered through a systematic method. For him, one of the most integral revelations for research is the research onion. He adds that it guides the researcher through all the stages that need to be encountered when developing a research methodology.



Sahil (2022) asserts that Saunders et al. (2019) research onion is beneficial because it is applicable to any domain of research (science, business, the arts etc.) making it adaptable to various research contexts, and improves research credibility. Additionally, Alturki (2021) notes that each layer of the research onion deals with one specific aspect of the study, demonstrating the variety of paradigms, strategies, and choices that researchers make during the course of their investigations. It illustrates the important issues that need to be taken into consideration during any research project. He adds that it is a powerful multidisciplinary application, which makes it appropriate for research. Ellul (2023) postulates that by understanding the different components of the research onion, a researcher ensures that his or her research endeavours are grounded, robust, valid, relevant and sound. Moreover, he proposes that it is essential to make informed decisions at each stage of conducting research, taking into account the nature of the research problem, the research context, and the intended research outcomes. Thus he contends that "a well-designed research study, rooted in a strong research onion, can contribute significantly to existing knowledge and advance our understanding in various fields of study" (para. 33). According to Saunders and Tosey (2013), designing research to answer a question or deal with a

problem is invariably constrained both by what is practicable and, of equal importance, what is ethical. For them understanding the outer layers of the research onion helps ensure that the core of data collection techniques and analysis actions used in the research conducted are both appropriate and coherent.

4.3. Philosophy

Moon and Blackman (2017) note that philosophy provides the general principles of theoretical thinking, a method of cognition, perspective and self-awareness, all of which are utilised to gain knowledge of reality and to design, conduct, analyse and interpret research and its outcomes. Easterby-Smith et al. (2015) postulate that the relationship between data and theory has been hotly contested by philosophers for many centuries. Failure to contemplate through such philosophical issues, while not necessarily fatal are a central concern for the design and evaluation of research. They recommend the following four reasons as to why a comprehension of philosophical issues is useful: 1) The researcher has an obligation to understand the basis issues of epistemology so as to have a clear sense of his or her reflexive role in research methods; 2) It can help to clarify research designs, which involves considering not only what kind of evidence is needed and how it is to be gathered and interpreted, but also how this will offer robust answers to basic questions being investigated in research; 3) Knowledge of philosophy can help researchers recognise which designs will work and which will not; and 4) It can help researchers identify, and even develop designs that may be outside their past experience. Saunders and Tosey (2013) note that how a researcher sees the world, his or her taken-for-granted assumptions about human knowledge and about the nature of the realities encountered, unescapably form, how a research question is understood, and the associated research design. They add that the main impact on this, a researcher's philosophy, is his or her personal view of what constitutes acceptable knowledge and the process by which this is developed. Tengli (2020) proposes the following types of philosophical assumptions, which researchers make as they embark on research:

1. Ontological assumptions—These are assumptions regarding the reality faced in research or what makes something a reality, and how a researcher can understand existence (Tengli, 2020).

- **2. Epistemological assumptions**—These are assumptions associated with human knowledge or what forms valid knowledge, whether it can be known, and how a researcher can attain and transfer it (Tengli, 2020).
- **3. Axiological assumptions**—These are assumptions about the level of influence researchers' values have on the research process or what is important and valuable in research.

4.3.1. Ontology

Craig (1998) asserts that the word 'ontology' is used to refer to philosophical investigation of existence, of being. Such investigation may be geared towards the concept of being, asking what 'being' means, or what it is for something to exist. It may also (or instead) be concerned with the question 'what exists?', or 'what general sorts of things are there?' Moreover, it is common to speak of a philosopher's ontology, meaning the kinds of things they consider to exist, or the ontology of a theory, meaning the things that would have to exist for that theory to be true.

In writing about ontology, Jaquette (2002) notes that the question of being is the question of what it means for something to have being, to exist. Additionally, researchers can think of the integral conceptual issue of pure philosophical ontology as the question of the meaning of the words 'exist' or 'being' or of what it means for something to exist or to be, to have 'being' as an existent entity in the actual world.

Moon and Blackman (2017) explain that ontology, the study of being is concerned with what actually exists in the world about which humans can gain knowledge. It helps researchers acknowledge how certain they can be about the nature and existence of the phenomena they are studying. For instance: 1) What truth claims a researcher can make about reality; 2) Who decides the authenticity of what is real; and 3) How researchers deal with varying and conflicting notions of reality.

Grodnitzky (2022) notes that understanding the nuances of reality can help researchers improve their personal and professional lives. He proposes the following three types of reality:

1. Individual reality—This reality is generated from the beliefs and experiences but cannot be shared directly. They are shared through verbal expressions, gestures or even props, however, there is no way of discovering that others are having or are able to have similar experiences (Grodnitzky, 2022).

- 2. Social reality—Social reality is created from the beliefs and experiences formed and shared in cultures and, in some cases, subcultures. For example, mission statements, vision statements, and cause statements are all social realities that businesses create in an effort to express their beliefs and alignment with their employees and other stakeholders. Moreover, social reality is complex because it can vary for different people based on group participation, their subcultures, and/or the information they consume (Grodnitzky, 2022).
- **3. Independent reality**—This reality exists whether one believes in it or not. It does not consider what one knows or feels. It does not change based on our experience, power, influence or the information one consumes (Grodnitzky, 2022).

In writing about the fundamental nature of reality, Baars (2022) postulates three notions of reality:

- **1. Mental reality**—This consists of conscious moments, either individual events, in our own minds, or in some universal mind (Baars, 2022).
- **2. Materialism or physicalism**—This is where fundamental reality is thought to be 'atoms and the void.' In this light, a number of scientists are physicalists, whether they are aware of it or not (Baars, 2022).
- **3. Dualism**—This is a compromise between mentalism and physicalism (Baars, 2022).

Palmer (2024) notes that there is subjective reality and objective reality. For him, objective refers to a reality that is external to the mind, and subjective refers to the internal reality of the mind. In as much as he acknowledges that objective and subjective reality are to be logical categories, he argues that they are logical until they begin intertwining. For example, if one person finds a chair to be beautiful, and everyone finds the same chair in the middle of a room to be beautiful, the subjective reality of a 'beautiful chair' begins to take on the qualities of objective reality, thus the chair is out of a person's mind. Questions about the nature of reality acknowledge that there are fundamental laws or principles that govern the behaviour of entities. These are the laws of nature. Swartz (2024) notes that according to the regularity theory, the laws of nature are statements of the uniformities or regularities in the world, they are mere descriptions of how the world is. And according to the necessitarian theory, laws

of nature are principles, which govern the natural phenomena of the world. That is the natural world obeys the laws of nature. In the natural sciences, these laws are known as physical laws and in the social sciences, they are known as social laws.

- 1. Physical laws—Goyal (2019) notes that physical laws play an important role in science. Many physical laws are built after various research and some are an improvement of existing laws and theories. Physical laws are conclusions drawn on the basis of scientific observations and experiments, which are repeated under varying conditions so as to arrive at assumptions which can be accepted worldwide.
- 2. Social laws—Social laws, also known as social norms, are collectively held beliefs about the type of behaviour that is considered appropriate in a given situation. They vary from specific customs, for example, the Western custom of shaking hands with somebody when meeting, to the more general laws that govern the behaviour, influence, and the understanding of other people (Swartz, 2024).

In the subject of nature of reality, there are questions concerning pluralism and monism.

- 1. Pluralism—According to Longley (2019) this is a political philosophy which asserts the notion that people of different beliefs, backgrounds, and lifestyles can coexist in the same society and participate equally in a political process. It assumes that it will influence key decision-makers to negotiate solutions that contribute to the common good of an entire society. The theory and mechanics of pluralism are also implemented in areas of culture and religion.
- 2. Monism—Craig (1998) contends that monism is a very broad term, pertinent to any doctrine which maintains either that there is ultimately only one thing, or only one type of thing. Additionally, it has been used to view that there is only one set of true beliefs. In this light, it is contrary to the equally broad term, 'pluralism.'

4.3.2. Epistemology

According to Steup and Neta (2020), the term 'epistemology' originates from the Greek words 'episteme' and logos'. Episteme can be translated as knowledge or understanding or acquaintance, whole 'logos' can be translated as 'account' or

'argument' or 'reason'. He provides a few varying epistemic endeavours: 1) Plato's epistemology was an effort to understand what it was to know, and how knowledge (unlike mere true opinion) is beneficial to the knower; 2) Locke's epistemology was an attempt to understand the operations of human understanding; 3) Kant's epistemology was an effort to understand the conditions of the possibility of human understanding; and 4) Russell's epistemology was an effort to grasp how modern science could be justified by appeal to sensory experience. Stroll and Martinich (2024) define epistemology as the philosophical study of the nature, origin, and limits of human knowledge. It is at times referred to as the theory of knowledge, and has a lengthy history within western philosophy, beginning with the ancient Greeks and continuing to the present. Additionally, together with metaphysics, logic, and ethics, it is one of the four key branches of philosophy, and almost every great philosopher has contributed to it. Truncellito (2024) asserts that epistemology is the study of knowledge and that epistemologists focus on a number of tasks, which can be classified into two categories:

- 1. Determining the nature of knowledge—This concerns what it means to say that someone knows, or doesn't know something. It is a matter of grasping what knowledge is, and how to differentiate between cases in which someone knows something and cases in which someone does not know something (Truncellito, 2024).
- 2. Determining the extent of human knowledge—This is concerned with how much we know or how much we can know. Moreover, it focuses on how we can use our reason, our senses, the testimony of others, and other resources to gain knowledge. It delves into seeking if there are limits to what we can know and the possibility of not knowing nearly as much as we perceive we know. It aims to discover whether we should have an authentic concern about scepticism, the notion that we do not or cannot know anything at all (Truncellito, 2024).

In writing about the nature of knowledge, Moxley (2023) notes that epistemologists aim to understand: 1) what constitutes knowledge as opposed to mere belief or opinion; 2) what constitutes a valid knowledge claim; and 3) how one's philosophical assumptions inform the aforementioned conceptions. He provides the following types of knowledge:

- 1. Declarative knowledge—This is explicit knowledge about facts, histories, ideas, topics, principles, and concepts. It concerns knowing that something exists (definitional knowledge) or is true or false (propositional knowledge) (Moxley, 2023).
- **2. Empirical knowledge**—This is information sourced from sensory experience, observation, or experimentation. Contrary to theoretical or innate knowledge, it is based on direct, observable evidence and practical experience. This type of knowledge is crucial in essential research-based writing, and fields such as natural sciences (Moxley, 2023).
- **3. Procedural knowledge**—In research, Peñalver (2015) notes that this is knowledge that a researcher must have to utilise research techniques to acquire information in a specific subject area.
- 4. Rhetorical knowledge—The University of Illinois Springfield (2024) offers a succinct definition of rhetoric knowledge when they note that rhetoric is the manner in which one communicates in everyday life. These communications can be persuasive in nature and formed by text, images, video, or any other type of media. Additionally, rhetoric needs an understanding and control of language and knowledge of culture. Additionally, the rhetorical situation includes the purpose, audience, topic, writer, context, genre, and other aspects to achieve an intended purpose. In a number of cases, rhetorical appeals (ethos, pathos and logos) can also contribute to this intended purpose (Moxley, 2023).

Within the field of epistemology, there are varying sources of knowledge and justification. Steup and Neta (2020) note that beliefs arise in individuals due to a wide variety of reasons. Among these reasons, it is vital to list psychological factors such as desires, emotional needs, prejudice, and biases of various kinds. Noticeably, when beliefs come from sources like these, they don't qualify as knowledge even if true. For true beliefs to stand as knowledge, it is mandatory that they originate in sources we have good cause to consider reliable. These are perception, introspection, memory, reason, and testimony:

1. **Perception**—Our perceptual faculties include at least one's five senses (sight, touch, hearing, smelling and tasting). It is vital to differentiate between an experience that can be categorised as perceiving that p (for example, seeing that there is coffee in the cup and tasting that it is sweet), which entails that p

- is true, and a perceptual experience in which it seems to us as though p, but where p might be false. The reason for making this differentiation is based on the fact that perceptual experience is fallible (Steup & Neta, 2020).
- 2. Introspection—This is the ability to investigate the present contents of one's own mind. Through introspection, one has knowledge of what mental states he/she is presently in, whether one is thirsty, tired, excited, or depressed. In comparison to perception, introspection appears to have special status. It is simple to see how a perceptual seeming can be wayward, what seems like a cup of coffee on the table could be a smart hologram that is visually indistinguishable from a real cup of coffee. Therefore, introspection is widely perceived to enjoy a special type of immunity to error (Steup & Neta, 2020).
- **3. Memory**—This is the ability to recall knowledge acquired in the past. What one remembers, though, need not to be a past event. It may be a present fact like one's phone number, or future event, such as the date of the next elections (Steup & Neta, 2020).
- **4. Reason**—Some beliefs are (thought to be) rationalised independently of experience. Justification of that kind is said to be a priori. A standard method of defining a priori justification is as follows: S is justified a priori in believing that p if and only if S's justification for believing that p does not depend on any experience. What exactly counts as experience? If by 'experience' we mean just perceptual experiences, justification deriving from introspective or memorial experiences would count as a priori. Contrary to priori, justification and knowledge that is not a priori is referred to as a posteriori, or empirical. For example, whether one is thirsty or not is something one knows empirically (based on introspective experiences), whereas one knows a priori that twelve divided by three is four (Steup & Neta, 2020).
- 5. Testimony—This is different from the aforementioned sources because it isn't distinguished by having its own cognitive faculty. Rather, to acquire knowledge of p through testimony is to come to know that p on the basis of someone saying that p must be widely comprehended, as including ordinary utterances of daily life, blog posts, articles by journalists, delivery of information on television, radio, tapes, books, and other media. Thus an example of gaining knowledge based on a testimony is when one asks the

person next to him/her what time it is, and he/she tells them (Steup & Neta, 2020).

In epistemology, there are concerns regarding justification. These questions are based on the following notions:

1. Internalism vs Externalism—Poston (2024) notes that the basic idea of internalism is that rationalisation is solely determined by factors that are internal to a person. However, externalists disagree with this, contending that justification relies on additional factors that are external to an individual. An integral aspect of this debate involves setting out exactly what counts as internal to an individual.

a. Internalism

Poston (2024) presents the following reasons for internalism:

- i. The Socratic/Cartesian project: One common technique internalists implement is to stress that epistemic justification needs to have good reasons for one's beliefs. Additionally, Socrates and Descartes emphasised that it is not rational to believe p without possessing a good cause for believing p. In this light, one common strategy internalists employ is to emphasise that epistemic justification requires having good reasons for one's beliefs. Additionally, one cannot appeal to the causal origins of that belief or to the reliability of the specific belief process. One cannot also appeal to another belief (Poston, 2024).
- ii. Deontology (The Ethics of Belief): A prominent origin of support for internalism is the deontological character of justification. Facts about justification are set in the bigger context of one's duties, obligations, and requirements. For instance, Descartes explains that false belief arises from the improper use of one's own will. Locke holds that though one may miss truth, if one governs one's doxastic attitudes in line with duty then one will not miss the reward of truth. Thus, justification is an issue of fulfilling one's intellectual duties but whether or not one has fulfilled one's intellectual duties is fully an internal matter (Poston, 2024).

b. Externalism

Poston (2024) also presents the following reasons for externalism:

- i. The Truth Connection: A strong argument for externalism is that epistemic justification is essentially linked to truth. It differs from prudential or moral justification. In accounting for the difference between prudential and epistemic justification, one can hold that epistemic justification suggests that one's belief is objectively likely to be true whereas prudential justification (or other epistemic forms of justification) does not. However, whether one's belief is objectively likely to be true is not determined by one's mental states or one's reflectively accessible states. The objective likelihood of a belief given a body of proof is an issue of the strength of correlation in the real world between the truth and belief and the body of evidence (Poston, 2024).
- ii. Grandma, Timmy and Lassie: A key incentive for externalism is that we correctly attribute knowledge to unsophisticated persons, children and some animals. These individuals lack internalist justification. Thus, their knowledge doesn't need justification or justification should be grasped externally. For example: 1) Grandma knows that she has hands even though she cannot rehearse an argument for that conclusion and cannot even think of anything else to defend the claim that she does have hands; 2) Timmy knows that it's a sunny day; and 3) Lassie knows that there's water in the bowl. In each case it appears that the subject is justified but lacks any internally accessible reason for the belief. Therefore, reflection on these examples, and many others like them, uphold the externalist central debate that internalism is too powerful. Individuals can know without possessing internalistic justification (Poston, 2024).
- **iii.** The Scandal of Skepticism: Another drive for externalism is its alleged virtues for handling skepticism in at least some of its varieties. A strong skeptical contention starts with the notion that we do not have direct access to facts about the external world. This

experience is caused by a state of one's brain and it is possible that science could create a technique of inducing in one that brain state. Skeptics contend that since we do not have direct access to facts about the external world, we lack a rationale for believing those facts. The last stage of skeptics' assertion is that we do lack enough evidence for inferential justification for believing those facts (Poston, 2024).

- 2. Claims, evidence and reasons—In sharing about claims, evidence, and reasons, The University of Pittsburgh (2024) define critical thinking as having the ability to make good arguments. Arguments are claims supported by reasons upheld by evidence. Thus, argumentation is a social process of two or more individuals making arguments, responding to one another and not simply restating the same claims and reasons and modifying or defending their positions accordingly.
 - **a. Claims:** These are statements about what is true or good or about what should be done or believed. They are possibly arguable.
 - **b. Reasons:** These are statements of support for claims, enabling those claims to be something more than mere propositions. Proof serves as support for the reasons provided and assists in moving audiences to accept claims.
 - **c. Evidence:** This is presented in different forms, and it tends to vary from one academic field or subject of contention to another. For example, scientific propositions about global warming need different types of evidence than meal time propositions about films.

4.3.2.1 Truth

In epistemology there are some concerns about truth. Dowden and Swartz (2024) note that truth is an issue of being clear about what one is saying when they say that a claim is true. They add that the most fundamental theories of truth are:

1. Correspondence Theory—This is one of the most well-known theories of truth in history. It was first proposed by Plato and by Aristotle in the realist theory, which claims that truth is what propositions have by corresponding to a way the world is. The theory argues that a proposition is true provided there

- exists a fact corresponding to it. Moreover it asserts that truth is a certain relationship, the relationship that holds between a proposition and its corresponding fact (Dowden & Swartz, 2024).
- 2. Coherence Theory—The theory accounts for the truth of an argument arising from a relationship between that proposition and other propositions. Additionally, coherence theories are important because they help to uncover how we arrive at our truth claims and knowledge. In this sense, individuals continually work at aligning their beliefs together into a coherent system (Dowden & Swartz, 2024).
- **3. Deflationary Theory**—Dowden and Swartz (2024) note that what all the theories of truth discussed so far have in common is the assumption that a proposition is true just in case the proposition has some property or other correspondence with the facts, satisfaction, coherence, utility, etc. They add that deflationary theories deny this assumption in the following assertions:
 - **a. Redundancy Theory**: When we assert a proposition openly, like saying, 'I smell the scent of violets,' then saying, 'It is true that I smell the scent of violets,' would be redundant, it would add nothing because the two have similar meanings. Current, more minimalist advocates of the redundancy theory withdraw from this statement about meaning and say merely that the two are necessarily equal (Dowden & Swartz, 2024).
 - b. Performative Theory: This theory of truth contends that ascribing truth to a proposition is not really characterising the proposition itself, nor is it saying something redundant. Rather, it is conveying something about the speaker's intentions. The speaker, through his/her agreeing with it is licensing our adoption of the proposition. Instead of saying, 'It is true that snow is white,' one could replace this by saying, 'I endorse that it is true that snow is white' (Dowden & Swartz, 2024).
 - **c. Prosentential Theory:** This theory of truth proposes that the grammatical predicate, 'is true,' does not work semantically or logically as a predicate. All uses of, 'is true,' are prosentential uses. For example, when someone asserts, 'it is true that it is snowing,'

the person is asking the hearer to consider the sentence, 'it is snowing,' additionally, the person is requesting the hearer to consider the sentence, 'it is snowing,' and is saying, 'that is true,' where the remark, 'that is true,' is taken holistically as a prosentence, in likeness to a pronoun. A pronoun such as 'she' is a replacement for the name of the individual being referred to. Similarly, 'That is true,' is a replacement for the proposition being considered. Therefore, according to the prosentential theory, all uses of 'true' can be reduced to uses either of 'That is true' or 'It is true' or variations of these with other tenses. This is because these latter prosentential uses of the word 'true' cannot be eliminated from our language during evaluation. The prosentential theory is not a redundancy theory (Dowden & Swartz, 2024).

4. Pragmatic Theory—A pragmatic theory of truth stands on the premise that a proposition is true if it is useful to believe. Thus, utility is the necessary sign of truth. Additionally, beliefs that lead to the best reward, that are the best justification of our actions, that endorse success, are truths, according to pragmatists (Dowden & Swartz, 2024).

5. Certainty and Fallibility

- **a. Certainty**—Belkoniene and Vollet (2024) note that certainty involves a valuable cognitive standing, which is often viewed as an ideal. They add that it is indeed natural to assess lesser cognitive standings, in particular beliefs and opinions, on the basis of one's intuitions regarding what is certain.
- b. Fallibility—In writing about fallibility, Leveille (2024) acknowledges the work of René Descartes who was a 17th century French mathematician, scientist, and philosopher, viewed as the first great 'modern philosopher,' best known for the quote 'cogito, ergo sum' which means 'I think, therefore I am.' Amongst his numerous contributions to the field, Descartes contributed to Cartesian Epistemology (Theory of Knowledge). He argued that for one to truly know something, the source which offered the knowledge must be perfectly reliable, that is it is never in error and is correct 100% of the

time. Thus, fallibilism is the theory that no source can be perfectly 100% infallible and therefore it is mandatory to admit that any knowledge has a greater than 0% chance of being inaccurate.

6. Epistemic virtues and vices— Rooj and Bruin (2022) assert that epistemic virtues are features that enable us to be excellent qua producers and consumers of epistemic goods, such as knowledge, understanding, or wisdom. Contrary to this, epistemic vices impede the realisation of these epistemic goods. One example of this is epistemic arrogance, which is a canonical vice.

4.3.3. Axiology

Smith and Thomas (1998) refer to axiology as the branch of practical philosophy that studies the nature of value. They add that axiologists study value in general instead of moral values in particular and frequently emphasise the plurality and heterogeneity of values while simultaneously adopting varying forms of realism about values. Historically, three schools of philosophers can be described as axiologists: 1) The original Austrian and German schools of value phenomenologists; 2) American theorists of value who offered an account of value, which decreases it to human interests; and 3) An English school, influenced by Austro-German phenomenology, which included diverse figures such as G.E. Moore, Hastings Rashdall and W.D. Ross. Duignan (2015) notes that Axiology, (from Greek axios—'worthy' and logos—'science'), also known as theory of value, is the philosophical study of goodness, or value, in the wide sense of these terms. Its significance is based on the considerable expansion that has given to the meaning of the term value, and the unification that it has offered for the study of a variety of questions regarding economics, morals, aesthetics, and even logic that had often been considered in relative isolation.

Schroeder (2021) asserts that the term 'value theory' is utilised in at least three different ways in philosophy. In its widest sense, value theory is a catch-all label used to encapsulate all branches of moral, social and political philosophy, aesthetics, and sometimes feminist philosophy and the philosophy of religion. In its narrowest sense, value theory is used for a relatively slim area of normative ethical theory specifically, but not exclusively, of concern to consequentialists. In this narrow sense, value theory is roughly tantamount to axiology. Thus, axiology can be perceived as chiefly concerned with categorising what things are good, and how good they are. For

instance, a traditional query of axiology concerns whether the objects of value are subjective psychological states, or objective states of the world.

In writing about traditional axiological questions, Schroeder (2021) contends that traditional axiology aims to investigate what things are good, how good they are, and how their goodness is related to one another. Whatever one considers as primary bearers of value to be, one of the chief questions of traditional axiology is that of what things are good—what is of value. There are two ways of delving into this question:

- 1. Intrinsic value—According to Schroeder (2021), the question philosophers have been interested in, is that of what is of intrinsic value, which is considered contrary to instrumental value. He notes that pragmatically, money is good because it leads to other good things. However it is argued, something must be good not just for what it leads to. Such things are said to be intrinsically good. Therefore, as Zimmerman and Bradley (2019) put it, the intrinsic value of something is said to be the value that has 'in itself,' or 'for its own sake,' or 'as such' or 'in its own right.' They add that many philosophers consider intrinsic value to be integral to a variety of moral judgements, for example, according to a fundamental form of consequentialism, whether an action is morally right or wrong has exclusively to do with whether its consequences are intrinsically better than those of any other action one can perform under the circumstances.
- 2. Extrinsic value—According to Zimmerman and Bradley (2019), that which is extrinsically good is good, not (insofar as its extrinsic value is concerned) for its own sake, but for the sake of something else to which it is linked in some manner. For instance, the goodness of assisting others in time of need is plausibly considered to be extrinsic (at least in part), being derivative (at least in part) from the goodness of something else, such as these people's needs being satisfied, or their experiencing pleasure, to which assisting them is linked in some causal manner. Additionally, Kapoor (2020) notes that a person accepts particular values by the pressure of his/her external environment and though he/she may not internalise them, his/her external behaviour is influenced by them. For example, honesty, discipline, punctuality, loyalty etc.

In the philosophical field of axiology, value has been mainly categorised into the following types:

- 1. Moral values—Merchey (2022) refers moral values are those that are good virtuous, prosocial, and positive. Some values that are commonly described as moral values include kindness, charity, love, virtue, helpfulness, honesty, truthfulness, character, magnanimity, altruism, care, caring, solicitude, righteousness, friendliness, generosity, probity, ethicality, morality, beneficence, benevolence, compassion, and many others.
- 2. Aesthetic values—Plato and Meskin (2014) refer to this as the value that an object, event, or state of affairs (most paradigmatically an artwork or the natural environment) possesses in virtue of its capacity to elicit pleasure (positive value) or displeasure (negative value) when increased or experienced aesthetically.
- 3. Economic values—Charalambakis (2024) notes that economic value is the worth of a good or service, which is determined by the market. He adds that an integral concern in economics is how we evaluate economic value of a good. Among the competing schools of economic theory, there are varying metrics for value evaluation, which constitute what is widely known as the theory of value.

In axiology, concerns on ethics have been discussed through the following concepts:

- 1. Normative ethics—Payne (2024) asserts that normative ethics is specifically focused on articulating and creating the general ethical theories in terms of which ethical opinions at the applied level might be rationalised. Additionally, main issues in normative ethics include what it is, for an action to be morally allowed and what it is, for a society to be just.
- 2. Applied ethics—According to Payne (2024), applied ethics is to consider what more general theories of good and bad have to opine about more specific issues. For example, whether or not the death penalty is morally justifiable, whether or not drugs should be legalised, and whether tax money should be used to offer benefits to the less fortunate are applied ethical issues.
- **3. Meta-ethics**—DeLapp (2024) explains that meta-ethics is a brand of analytic philosophy that investigates the status, foundations, and scope of moral values, properties, and words. Whereas, the areas of applied ethics and normative

theory are concerned with what is moral, meta-ethics focus on what morality itself is.

Still, in axiology, concerns on aesthetics have been discussed. Scruton and Munroe (2024) refer to aesthetics as the philosophical study of beauty and taste. It is closely linked to the philosophy of art, which is focused on the nature of art and the concepts in terms of which individual works of art are interpreted and evaluated. In this school of philosophy there are various studies of aesthetics:

- 1. Nature of beauty—According to Startwell (2022), the nature of beauty is one of the most lasting and controversial themes in Western philosophy, along with the nature of art, one of the two fundamental issues in the history of philosophical aesthetics. Beauty, has traditionally been counted among the ultimate values, with goodness, truth, and justice.
- 2. Art and experience—In writing about art and experience, Chaliakopoulos (2020) acknowledge the work of prominent philosopher John Dewey. Dewey's idea of art was contrary to aesthetic theories as they served to further distance art by presenting it as something ethereal and disconnected from day-to-day experiences. For Dewey: a) the foundation of art is the aesthetic of experience, which is present in every part of human life: b) there is no need to distinguish art into low and high, fine, and useful; c) art and society must remain linked, and it is only in this manner that art can play a meaningful part in people's lives; d) there is only one way for art to become once again a part of social life. That is for individuals to accept the link between aesthetic and the ordinary experience.
- **3. Philosophy of art**—According to Hospers (2022), philosophy of art, is the study of the nature of art, including concepts like interpretation, representation and expression, and form. It is closely linked to aesthetics, the philosophical study of beauty and taste.

In axiology, value has also been discussed in the following two ways:

1. Subjective vs Objective value—Raibley (2014) notes that evaluative facts for example, the fact that knowledge is good, and the fact that stealing is wrong are called objective if they obtain independently of the beliefs and other attitudes (desires, approvals, hopes, wishes, fears, likings etc.) of subjects.

- Contrary to this, evaluative facts are subjective if their existence relies on the beliefs or attitudes of subjects.
- 2. Relativism vs Absolutism—Osmundsen (2018) distinguishes between relativism and absolutism. He notes that relativism too, is a metaethical view concerning the nature of morality. It asserts that morality is not universally binding to all people all the time, in all places. Rather, it may only apply to some people relative to specific times and places. Contrary to this, absolutism is, among other things, a metaethical view about the nature of morality. Thus, to say that morality is absolute means that it is universally binding to all people all the time, in all locations.

Value has also been discussed with the lens of evaluation and judgement. Jameson (2015) distinguishes between value and evaluation. He asserts that: 1) evaluations are expansive in nature whereas judgements are constrictive; 2) evaluations offer one freedom of choice whereas judgements limit one's behaviour and the behaviour of others; 3) evaluations merely state what is in a neutral, objective manner whereas judgements showcase an opinionated, subjected value; and 4) Evaluations can be seen as a mental or scientific approach, while judgements are emotional in nature and often suggest a moral, self-righteous approach. Thus, there are two main areas of discussion within evaluation and judgement:

- 1. Value judgements—Krishna (2007) contends that a value judgement is the assertion or denial of a value-predicate of some object or state of affairs. Harsanyi (1991) notes that one may define value judgements as judgements of approval or disapproval claiming objective validity. Additionally many of our judgements of approval and disapproval do not involve such claims. He adds that in claiming objective validity, value judgements resemble factual judgements (both those dealing with empirical facts and those dealing with logical mathematical facts). However, they are similar to personal preference in expressing human attitudes (those of approval or disapproval) rather than uttering beliefs about issues of fact, as factual judgements do.
- 2. Preference and choice—From a marketing perspective, Amir and Levav (2008) assert that the difference between choice construction and preference construction is essential to marketing managers because repeat purchase is often perceived as a sign of customer preference. In their study of choice

construction versus preference construction, they demonstrate that preference might be a learned solution to the choice problem and that as soon as the competitive context changes (even in a normatively meaningless manner), so will customer preference. In acknowledging their work, Taylor (2019) notes that a preference emerges when an individual takes time to evaluate the value of varying options. Contrary to this, a choice is a context-driven decision. Additionally, preferences develop slowly and with analysis whereas, choices are fast and influenced by an individual's surroundings.

Another contested area of study in axiology is value conflicts and resolution. Shonk (2024) notes that some of our most heated negotiations and disputes are about our core values, including personal moral standards, religious and political beliefs, and our family's welfare. In a study on hierarchy of values, Min (1998) asserts that higher values can be categorised into the following five classes in descending rank: 1) Absolute values such as absolute truth, absolute goodness, absolute beauty, and absolute holiness; 2) The act of contributing to the development and happiness of humankind; 3) The act of contributing to the nation or the state; 4) The act of contributing to the regional society; 5) The act of cultivating oneself and managing one's family well.

4.3.4. Philosophical approaches to research

In writing about philosophical approaches to research, Saunders and Tosey (2013) note that a researcher who is focused on observable phenomena, such as the resources needed in a manufacturing process, has a high potential of having a different standpoint on how research should be conducted from a researcher who's focus is understanding the subjective meanings of the feelings and attitudes of the workers in that same manufacturing process. For both these researchers, their methodological choice and strategy vary considerably, however, so will their views on what data are essential and, perhaps more importantly, what are useful. Saunders et al. (2023) present the five integral philosophies in business management: positivism, critical realism, interpretivism, postmodernism and pragmatism.

1. Positivism—According to Saunders et al. (2023), positivism is linked to the philosophical view of the natural scientist and involves working with an observable social reality to create law-like generalisations. Additionally, it

promises unambiguous and accurate knowledge and stems from the works of Francis Bacon, Auguste Comte, and the early twentieth-century group of philosophers and scientists known as the Vienna Circle. The label positivism refers to the significance of what is posited that is, given. Feigl (2024) notes that the basic assertions of positivism are: 1) all knowledge regarding matters of fact is based on the 'positive' data of experience; and 2) beyond the realm of fact is that of pure logic and pure mathematics. In a later phase of positivism, these two disciplines (pure logic and mathematics) were categorised as purely formal sciences. On the negative and critical side, the positivist became noted for their repudiation of metaphysics, that is, of speculation regarding the nature of reality and that drastically goes beyond any possible evidence that could either uphold or deny such transcendent knowledge claims. In its basic ideological stance, positivism is thus worldly, secular, anti-theological and anti-metaphysical.

- 2. Critical realism—For Saunders et al. (2023), critical realists view reality as external and independent, but not directly accessible through observation and knowledge of it. In this sense, in his critical research on critical realism, Zhang (2023) posits that observable events are the actualisation of the unobservable real, manipulatable, and internal mechanisms. Thus, the social world can really be understood only if individuals understand the structures that generate events, and it is necessary for the empirical study of the observable world to be accompanied by sufficient 'ontological' research of the hidden real generative structures. With regard to critical realism, Saunders et al. (2023) posit that what we experience is the empirical, in other words sensations, which are some of the appearances of the things in the real world, rather than the actual things. Critical realists illustrate how frequently our senses deceive us.
- 3. Interpretivism—Scauso (2020) notes that since the 1980s, scholars refuting the hegemony of positivist methodologies in the social sciences began to promote interpretive approaches. While generating discussions on social sciences, they began to endorse interpretive approaches, thus, creating discussions about methodological pluralism and enabling a slow, and often resisted, proliferation of theoretical diversity. Within this context, interpretivism gained a particular definition, which encompassed meaning-

centred research and problematised positivist ideas of truth correspondence, objectivity, generalisation, and linear processes of research. Saber (2017) explains that interpretivism upholds that in social phenomena, we cannot measure everything. Thus we should view phenomena with different lenses because a number of factors such as language, culture, viewpoints, and beliefs form alternative truths for groups or individuals. Additionally, researchers overlook their bias while quantifying social concepts. They argue that some justifications work for society, and the same explanations might work differently in another community. Therefore, we should not search for a global and optimum answer for each problem. For Saunders et al. (2023), interpretivists assert that human beings and their social worlds cannot be studied in a similar way to physical phenomena, and therefore social science research should be distinguished from natural science research rather than trying to emulate the latter. As different individuals of different cultural backgrounds, under different circumstances and at different times make different meanings, and so generate and experience different social realities, interpretivists are critical of the positivist attempts to discover definite, universal 'laws' that apply to everybody. Rather, they believe rich insights into humanity are lost if such complexity is diminished entirely to a series of lawlike generalisations. The meaning of interpretivist research is to develop new, richer understandings and interpretations of social worlds and contexts.

With regard to a philosophical approach to research, this study stands on the above premise. As a football fan, a long-time African supporter of Arsenal from Nairobi, and a researcher, based on my intrinsic and internalistic philosophical values, one cannot simply quantify a football fan's love, loyalty, awareness, perceived quality, and associations of a football club (brand). These are deeply rooted aspects of fan engagement that are relativist in nature and thus cannot be approached with a positivist mind-set. Additionally, as a football fan who has been involved in football fan communities (both online and offline), it would certainly be cruel to have a 'subject to object' relationship with my Arsenal comrades, after the epic journey we've been through so far. Thus, in sincere empathy, this study philosophically adopts an interpretivist approach to research, which upholds that football fans (human

- beings) within online football fan communities (online social worlds—Arsenal's official YouTube channel and AFTV) can be studied in an approach that pays respect to how their different cultural backgrounds, different circumstances, and different timeframes generate different meanings and realities.
- **4. Postmodernism**—According to Saunders et al. (2023), postmodernism stresses the role of language and power relations, seeking to question accepted ways of thinking and give voice to alternative marginalised opinions. It emerged in the late twentieth century and has been most closely linked with the work of French philosophers Jean- François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari and Jean Baudrillard. Duignan (2024) adds that in Western philosophy, a late twentieth century movement characterised by broad skepticism, subjectivism, or relativism, a general suspicion of reason, and an acute sensitivity to the role ideology plays in asserting and maintaining political and economic strength. He provides some postmodernist arguments: 1) Postmodernists deny that there is an objective natural reality, one whose existence and qualities are logically independent of human beings or their investigative techniques. They refute this notion as a type of naïve realism; and 2) Postmodernists refute the assertion that through the utilisation of logic and reason, and with the more specialised tools offered by science and technology, human beings are likely to improve themselves and their societies. Some go so far as to imply that science and technology and even logic and reason are inherently destructive and oppressive, because they have been used by evil people, especially during the twentieth century, to extinguish and afflict others.
- 5. Pragmatism—Saunders et al. (2023) note that pragmatism originated in the late nineteenth-early twentieth century USA in the work of philosophers Charles Pierce, William James and John Dewey. It aims to reunite both objectivism and subjectivism, facts and values, accurate and rigorous knowledge and different contextualised experiences. It does this by considering theories, concepts, ideas, hypothesis, and study findings, not in abstract form, but in relation to their practical consequences in specific contexts. Thus, reality matters to pragmatists as practical effects of ideas, and

knowledge is valued for enabling actions to be carried out successfully. Legg (2021) asserts that pragmatism is a philosophical tradition that largely understands knowing the world as inseparable from agency within it. This general notion has attracted a remarkably rich and at times contrary range of interpretations, including: 1) that all philosophical concepts should be tested via scientific experimentation; 2) that a claim is true only if it useful; 3) that experience consists in transacting with rather than representing nature; and 4) that articulate language is based on a deep bed of shared human practices that can never be fully made explicit.

The aforementioned philosophical approaches to research form a philosophical underpinning for an approach to theory development.

4.4. Approach to theory development

Saunders et al. (2023) posits that answering research questions will involve the use of theory. For them, if one's research begins with theory, frequently developed from consuming academic literature, and he/she designs a research strategy to test the theory, he/she is using a deductive approach. Contrary to this, if one's research begins by collecting data to investigate a phenomenon and he/she is developing or build theory (often in the form of a conceptual framework), then he/she is using an inductive approach. Where one is collecting data to examine a research phenomenon, identify themes and explain patterns, to create a new or modify an existing theory that he/she subsequently tests through additional data collection, then he/she is using an abductive approach. Figure 16 illustrates the aforementioned approaches to theory development.

	Deduction	Induction	Abduction
Logic	In a deductive inference, when the premises are true, the conclusion must also be true	In an inductive inference, known premises are used to generate untested conclusions	In an abductive inference, known premises are used to generate testable conclusions
Generalisability	Generalising from the general to the specific	Generalising from the specific to the general	Generalising from the interactions between the specific and the general
Use of data	Data collection is used to evaluate propositions or hypotheses related to an existing theory	Data collection is used to explore a phenom- enon, identify themes and patterns and create a conceptual framework	Data collection is used to explore a phenomenon, identify themes and patterns, locate these in a conceptual framework and test this through subsequent data collection and so forth
Theory	Theory falsification or verification	Theory generation and building	Theory generation or modification; incorporating existing theory where appropriate, to build new theory or modify existing theory
Philosophical underpinning*	Positivism	Interpretivism (Critical realism)	(Interpretivism) Critical realism
	(Pragmatism)	(Postmodernism) (Pragmatism)	Postmodernism Pragmatism

1. **Deduction**—According to Saunders et al. (2023) deduction relies on what is perceived as scientific research. It involves the creation of a theory that is then subjected to a rigorous test through a series of propositions. As such, it is the overriding approach to theory development in natural science studies, where laws present the basis of explanation, permit the anticipation of phenomena, predict their occurrence and therefore allow them to be controlled. For Bara et al. (2001), deduction is a systematic process whose aim is to draw valid consequence from a series of premises. It needs one to consider the premises as true and to deduce what conclusion, if any, follows. They define a valid deduction as one that produces a conclusion that must be true given that the premises are true. Bradford et al. (2024) assert that deductive reasoning, also known as deduction, is a straightforward method of reasoning that uses a general principle or premise as grounds to draw particular conclusions. This form of reasoning leads to valid conclusions when the premise is known to be true. They provide the example of a statement made about a spider, the statement claiming all spiders have eight legs is known to be true. Based on that premise, one can reasonably conclude that, because tarantulas are spiders, they also must have eight legs.

- **2. Induction**—Thilly (1903) distinguished induction from deduction. He noted that in induction, we ground our judgement on particulars to a universal assertion concerning them; while in deduction, we ground our judgement on a universal assertion, that is, we begin with a universal proposition and deduce from its other propositions according to the principle of identity. More recently, in writing about induction, Saunders et al. (2023) acknowledge that the emergence of the social sciences in the twentieth century caused social science scholars to be cautious of deduction. They were critical of a reasoning approach that enabled a cause-effect association to be made between particular variables without a comprehension of the way in which humans understood their social world. For them, cultivating such an understanding is the power of an inductive approach. DeCarlo (2018) provides a sequential explanation for induction. He notes that when a researcher uses an inductive approach, they start by collecting data that is related to their topic of interest. Once a substantial amount of data has been gathered, the research will break from data collection to step back and get a bird's eye view of their data. At this stage, they begin with a set of observations and then they proceed from those specific experiences to a more general set of assertions about those experiences. Thus, they move from data to theory, or from specific to the general.
- 3. Abduction—Saunders et al. (2023) explain that adaptive theory development is open and sensitive to data while also using pre-existing theories for inspiration and to help recognise and understand patterns. They relate this to business and management by noting that an abductive approach to theory development matches what many researchers in business and management do. It starts with the observation of a surprising phenomenon or fact; it then identifies a plausible theory of how this could have happened. Historically, Douven (2019) explains that the term 'abduction' originates in the work of American pragmatist philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. He intended to show the process of searching for hypothesis steered by explanatory considerations. It thus had a place in (what later came to be called) the context of discovery. Currently, the term 'abduction' is often used to refer to a form of inference which we take to be warranted on explanatory bases, as when for

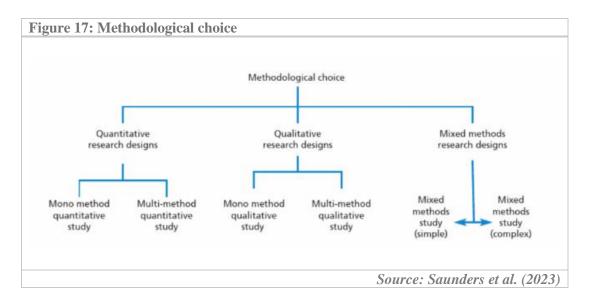
instance, we infer that it has been raining when we see that the streets are wet, given that having rained is the best (although not the only possible) explanation of the streets being wet. More recently, Douven (2021) notes that in philosophical literature, the term 'abduction' is utilised in two associated and different senses. In both senses, the term refers to some type of explanatory reasoning. But, in the historical first sense, it refers to the place of explanatory reasoning in creating hypothesis, while in the sense in which it is often used in modern literature, it refers to the place of explanatory reasoning in rationalising hypothesis. In the latter sense, abduction is also often known as 'inference to the best explanation.'

In terms of selecting a philosophical approach to research, Saunders et al. (2023) notes that it is possible to combine deduction and induction within the same piece of research. For them, if a researcher has questions about what reasoning will override their research, the honest answer is, 'it depends'. Particularly, it depends on the researcher's philosophy, the emphasis of the research, and the nature of the topic of interest. For Saunders et al. (2023), varying philosophies usually lead researchers to different approaches: so positivists often select deduction, interpretivists tend to choose induction, and postmodernists, pragmatists and critical realists frequently choose abduction (although critical realists would often call their approach 'retroduction'). In this sense, with regard to an approach to theory development, this study adopts and lends itself to abduction, despite the researcher's interpretivist philosophical stance. Accordingly, the researcher begun by observing and collecting a perplexing set of data, which was the rapid growth of online football fan communities within football official and Fan TV YouTube channels (research phenomena in their online social worlds), and aimed to find out what value they have for football club brands. To offer the best explanation for this, the researcher investigated how brand equity (theory) exists within the aforementioned communities. In light of the aforementioned, approach to theory development often informs the researcher's methodological choice.

4.5. Methodological choice

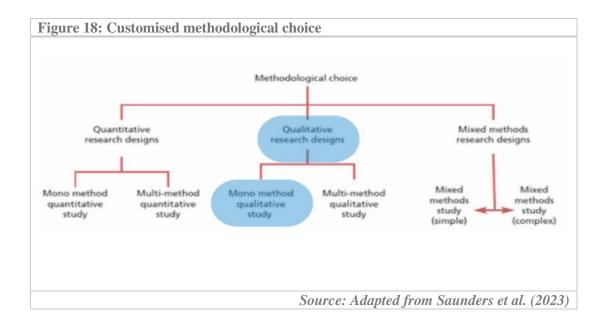
According to Saunders et al. (2023), research designs are often referred to as quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods. These labels show whether the data collected are numeric, non-numeric, or a combination of both. For them quantitative refers to any data collection processes (such as a questionnaire) or analysis techniques (such as graphs or statistics) that produce or use numerical data. Contrary to this, qualitative refers to any data collection processes (such as interviews or unstructured observations) or analysis techniques (such as narrative analysis or grounded theory) that produce or use non-numerical data. They highlight the differences between three combinations of methodological choices: 1) Where more than one quantitative data collection process and corresponding analysis technique is used, it is referred to as a multi-method quantitative design; 2) Where more than one qualitative data collection procedure and corresponding analysis is used, it is a multi-method qualitative design; and 3) Where quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques and analysis procedures are used, it is a mixed methods design.

Abdull Wahab et al. (2018) note that quantitative methods involve numerical analysis and are often used for statistical mathematics. Additionally, they are often used for confirmatory types of study. Contrary to this, qualitative methods enable researchers to conduct exploratory studies, which can be done through gathering opinions or reasons. Mixed methodology utilises both qualitative and quantitative approaches in conducting research. Schoonenboom (2023) explains that mixed methods research is often defined as the combination and integration of qualitative and quantitative data. She postulates that qualitative and quantitative data are essentially different, and this difference does not concern words and numbers but condensation and structure. As qualitative data are analysed with qualitative methods and quantitative data with quantitative methods, we cannot evaluate one type of data with the other type of method. Additionally, quantitative data analysis can reveal new patterns, but these are often aspects that are concealed in data. To consider data as quantitative or qualitative, it is necessary to judge these data as end products, not in terms of the process through which they come into being. Figure 17 illustrates various methodological choices and how they relate to each other.



Saunders et al. (2023) note that within a number of areas in business and management, there has been a decline in the diversity of methodological selections. Additionally, because they are methodological pluralists, they consider, dependent upon the research question, all three research designs viable to provide valuable insights. Figure 18 showcases a customised methodological choice diagram for this study.

As per figure 18, this study adopts a qualitative research design which seeks to gain rich and in-depth insights (non-numerical data) about how football fans (research phenomena) within football official and Fan TV YouTube channels (online social reality) showcase brand equity (theory). In doing so, it adopts netnography (a qualitative strategy). It is important to note that although netnography permits a multimethod qualitative strategy, in this study netnography is depicted as a mono-method qualitative study because within it, the researcher applies only one research method, which is non-obtrusive observation. Netnography will be extensively discussed as a research strategy in the next section.



4.6. Strategies

Johannesson and Perjons (2014) note that researches have used research methods for supporting the development of reliable knowledge based on empirical proof and logical arguments. Some research strategies that have been applied towards this are experiment, survey, case study, ethnography, grounded theory, action research, and phenomenology. Creswell (2009) refers to the aforementioned strategies as strategies of inquiry. He adds that the strategies available to the researcher have increased over the years as computer technology has advanced our data analysis and power to evaluate complex models. Individuals have also articulated new processes for conduction of social research. According to Saunders et al. (2023), commonly used research strategies in business and management are experiment, survey, archival research, case study, ethnography, action research, and grounded theory. Creswell (2009) divides them into their relation to qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods research (see figure 19).

Quantitative	Qualitative	Mixed Methods
Experimental designs Non-experimental designs, such as surveys	Narrative research Phenomenology Ethnographies Grounded theory studies Case study	Sequential Concurrent Transformative

- 1. Experimental designs—Bell (2009) explains that experimental design is the procedure of conducting research in an objective and controlled manner so that precision is maximised and specific conclusions can be derived regarding a hypothesis statement. Generally, the purpose is to establish the effect that a factor or independent variable has on a dependent variable. Moreover, the principles of experimental design play a crucial role in research that does not adhere to the strict tenets of hypothesis testing.
- 2. Surveys—Price et al. (2015) asserts that survey research is a quantitative and qualitative method with two integral characteristics: 1) The variables being studied are measured using self-reports. In essence, survey researchers ask their participants (who are often called respondents in survey research) to report directly on their own thoughts, feelings, and behaviours; and 2) Significant focus is given to the issue of sampling. Specifically, survey researchers have a strong preference for large random samples because they offer the most accurate estimates of what is true in the population. Glasow (2005) notes that in survey research, independent and dependent variables are used to define the scope of study, but cannot be explicitly controlled by the researcher. Before conducting the survey, the researcher must predicate a model that identifies the forecasted associations among these variables. The survey is then formed to test this model against observations of the phenomena.
- **3. Archival research**—According to Pierce-Moses (2005), archival research is research involving primary sources held in archives, a special collections library, or other repository. Its sources can be manuscripts, documents, records (including electronic records), objects, sound and audiovisual materials, or

- other materials. Schmidt (2024) explains that archives can store both published and unpublished materials, and those materials can be in any format. Some examples are manuscripts, letters, photographs, moving equivalents of all these items. Additionally, materials in an archive facility are often unique, specialised, or rare objects, meaning very few of them exist in the world, or they are the only ones of their kind.
- **4.** Case study—Raikar (2024) refers to a case study as "a detailed description and assessment of a specific situation in the real world created for the purpose of deriving generalizations and other insights from it" (para. 1). They add that a case study can be about a person, a group of people, an organisation, or an event, among other topics. Crowe et al. (2011) note that the case study strategy enables in-depth, multifaceted explorations of complex issues in their real-life settings. Additionally, the application of this strategy is useful when there is a need to gain in-depth appreciation of an issue, event, or phenomenon of interest, in its/his/her/their natural real-life context. Additionally, as Heale and Twycross (2018) put it, when describing the phases undertaken while using a case study approach, this strategy of research enables the researcher to take a complex and wide topic, or phenomenon, and narrow it down into manageable research questions. They add that by gathering qualitative or quantitative datasets about the phenomenon, the researcher benefits from a more in-depth insight into the phenomenon than would be obtained using only one type of data.
- 5. Ethnography—Augustyn (2024) explains that ethnography is a descriptive study of a specific human society or the procedure of making such a study. He adds that modern ethnography is heavily based on fieldwork and requires the complete immersion of the anthropologist in the culture and day-to-day life of the individuals who are the subjects of interest in his/her study. He adds that ethnography, by virtue of its intersubjective nature, is essentially comparative. Given that the anthropologist in the field necessarily retains certain cultural biases, his/her observations and descriptions must, to a certain extent, be comparative. Thus formulating of generalisations about culture and deriving of comparisons inevitably become elements of ethnography. Princeton University (2024) offer a definition of ethnography. They note that it is a

research strategy integral to knowing the world from the standpoint of its social relations. For them, it is a qualitative research strategy predicated on the diversity of culture at home (wherever that may be) and abroad. It is the primary strategy of social and cultural anthropology, but it is crucial to the social sciences and humanities generally, and derives its methods from many quarters, including the natural sciences. According to Logan (2023), ethnographic research is a qualitative strategy where researchers observe and/or interact with a study's participants in their real-life environment. It was popularised by anthropology, but is utilised across a broad array of social sciences. In this strategy, they note that a good researcher is essential when observing and/or interacting with target audiences in their real-life environment.

- 6. Action research—Oosthuizen (2002) explains that action research has a twofold focus: Action + Research = Action Research. Action research is often
 planned to bring change of practice, while simultaneously generating
 knowledge. These combined characteristics make it useful for exploratory
 research to bring improvement of practice, or to offer new solutions to practical
 issues. Action research studies are often conducted in discrete cycles, where
 later cycles are utilised to test, support and refine insights and results from
 previous cycles.
- 7. Grounded theory—According to Tie et al. (2019), grounded theory is a popular methodology applied in many research studies. They add that qualitative and quantitative data generation techniques can be utilised in grounded theory research. It aims to discover or construct theory from data, systematically obtained and evaluated using comparative analysis. Charmaz (2015) notes that grounded theory assumes that researchers can develop substantive and formal theories from systematic evaluation of empirical data. By starting with inductive data and successively creating abstract concepts and their relationships, grounded theory marries data and theoretical analysis. This strategy consists of systematic techniques to guide qualitative inquiry, specifically, data analysis. It favours theory construction over description, collective patterns over individual narratives, developing new concepts over

- applying received theory, and theorising processes over assuming stable cultures.
- 8. Narrative inquiry—Clandanin (2010) explains that narrative inquiry is the study of experience understood in a narrative manner. It is a way of contemplating about, and studying experience. Narrative inquirers think narratively about experience throughout inquiry. It adheres to a recursive, reflexive process of moving from field (with starting points in telling or living of stories) to field texts (data) to interim and final research texts. Bell (2002) notes that narrative is based on the epistemological proposition that we as human beings make sense of random experience by the imposition of story structures. That is, we choose those pieces of experience to which we will attend, and we pattern those chosen pieces in ways that reflect, and in ways that echo the stories available to us.

Strategically, this study adopts and lends itself to netnography (and adaptation of ethnography). Consequently, it is a descriptive study of football fans (a specific human society) through immersion into football official and Fan TV YouTube channels (online social communities in their online reality) through-out the EPL season 2022/23, on a match-by-match basis (day-to-day lives of a specific a human society), to find out how they showcase brand equity (theory) of a football club brand.

4.6.1 Netnography

Before embarking on defining what netnography is, it is worth noting who the scholar behind this research strategy is, Prof. Robert Kozinets. Kozinets (2020) has developed researcher methods and theories that are broadly used globally. In 1995, during a PhD dissertation study, he invented the term 'netnography'—and started constructing techniques behind it. Along the way, his techniques were improved by presentations at many notable universities. Asking questions concerning methodology, sociality, technology, utopia, and desire, his research pushed disciplinary boundaries to reveal a more integrative, moral, and expressive form of studying and theorising the world around us. Heath (2023) notes that netnography was also written about by Kozinets in his 1998 book 'On Netnography: Initial Reflections on Consumer Research Investigations of Cyberculture.' Additionally, in 1995 he incorporated an early version of netnography to study online fan discussions about the Star Trek franchise. This

studying of online fan discussions about the Star Trek Franchise was presented by Kozinets (1997) in his PhD dissertation titled, 'To Boldly Go' where he explains that the fan club, convention and communities of Star Trek fans were studied in a 20-month situated ethnography in an endeavour to bring attention to contemporary consumer behaviour. In writing about the need for netnography, Kozinets (2020) explains that when he first coined the term in 1995, the act of doing social media studies of any kind was still emergent, sketchy, and often unnamed. It was clear to him that the processes which worked well in the physical realm of qualitive research, did not translate to the online environment. Thus, spurred by insight from his colleagues, he started developing netnography as a new (at the time) discipline that adapted ethnographic and qualitative research methods to the novel and still emerging contingencies of social media environments.

Hitherto, a number of scholars and/or practitioners have attempted to define netnography. Hanell and Severson (2024) assert that netnography is an adaptation of ethnography to conduct research on digital interactions. DeVault (2017) contends that the term netnography derives its name from ethnography and net (internet). It is a type of qualitative research conducted by researchers who enter and collect data within the cultural or sociological context that is the interest of their study. They add that ethnography and netnography share a set of attributes: 1) Both approaches to study human behaviour are descriptive (non-experimental); 2) They utilise multiple methods; 3) They are adjustable to various contexts; and 4) They are immersive in nature. Tusche (2024) offers a practical definition. She notes that netnography is a qualitative research strategy where researchers observe and analyse consumer dialog in online communities with the aim of achieving an improved understanding of target audiences. This enables researchers to comprehend consumers' needs, wishes, experiences, motivations, attitudes, and perceptions. Additionally, by empathic and non-obtrusive immersion, netnography captures the individuals' true, unadorned emotional world, as well as their natural behaviour. For academics, researchers and practitioners, Kozinets (2020) defines netnography as "a form of qualitative research that seeks to understand the cultural experiences that encompass and are reflected within the traces, practices, networks and systems of social media" (p. 14). In the African context, Viljoen (2022) a South African scholar, vehemently endorses netnography. She asserts that as researchers, we are constantly searching for new

information and innovative methodologies to improve and advance our disciplines. For her, netnography is a breakthrough, as it offers the access to and analysis of a wealth of information that has seldom been accessible. Specifically, for marketing scholars, netnography provides an open window into consumers' lives.

4.6.1.1. Netnographic practices and data operations

Kozinets (2020) asserts that the four distinct elements that distinguish netnography from every other investigative route are: 1) its cultural focus; 2) its use of social media data; 3) its requirement of appropriate engagement; and 4) its specification of particular procedures as a nexus of netnographic praxis.

- 1. Cultural focus—Here, Kozinets (2020) re-iterates that netnography is a form of ethnography. Like ethnography, it focuses on an understanding a phenomenon in focus, site, topic, or people that is attuned to difference, complexity, context, and meaning. If culture is socially patterned human thought and action, netnography aims to find out these meanings within the realms of social media through:
 - a. The use of new language and symbols, such as novel words, acronyms, memes, fonts, or emojis, which may be formed exclusively for online use, or reflected online.
 - b. The expression of various online rituals, such as posting specific types of videos, images, or avatars.
 - c. The adoption of new identities, showcased through role modelling and play acting, adopting new fashions, trying new social positions (such as influencer, or activist). Duffy (2020) defines social media influencers as a subset of digital content creators defined by their large online following, distinctive brand persona, and patterned association with commercial sponsors.
 - d. The telling of stories, sharing of beliefs, the forwarding of powerful images and media.
 - e. The inclusions and strengthening of value and value systems through feedback reward structures of social media sharing, commenting, and liking.

- f. Power relations, group dynamics, exclusion and inclusion, submission and domination, and hierarchies that showcase themselves online.
- 2. Social media data—This differentiates netnography from traditional ethnography. Netnography is primarily concerned with social media communications. In a recapitulative sense, according to Gregersen (2024), social media is a type of mass media communications on the Internet (such as on websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos). He notes that social networking and social media are overlapping concepts, but social networking is often comprehended as users developing communities among themselves whereas social network is more about using social networking sites and associated platforms to build an audience.
- 3. Immersive engagement—For Kozinets (2020), an integral factor in netnography is a reflective type of personal involvement in the phenomenon of interest by the members of the research team or the individual researcher. He notes that "netnographic engagement does not necessarily need to involve discussion with other people, although it often does. It does not need to involve posting messages. It does not need interviews" (p. 135). However, it is necessary for data collection and its later analysis to reflect and capture an active intellectual and emotional engagement with online sites.
- 4. Netnographic praxis—In this element, Kozinets (2020) notes that netnography gains an unparalleled level of operational precision, escorted by entirely new terminology. With that precision and new terminology come a clear variation from other methods. In this sense, he clarifies that "a given piece of research is a netnography if it utilises recognised and recommended netnographic research practices, and also discursively demonstrates awareness of netnographic conventions, terminology, history, methodological perspectives, and other relevant scholarly words that might impact upon its procedures and topic." (p. 136).

4.6.1.2. Autonetnography

According to Kozinets and Kedzior (2009), "Auto-netnography is an approach to netnography that highlights the role of the netnographer's own experiences of his or her own online experiences. It captures and documents these experiences through the careful personal observation of online participation, autobiographical attention to the interrelation of various experienced 'worlds'—both online and off/real—reflexive field noting, self- and first-person image and other data captures, and first-person narratives which make their way into the final representation carried in the netnographic text" (p. 12). They also recognise the roots of autonetnography and note that autoethnography entails a personalised writing bravura associated to autobiography, where reflections sourced from the author's direct experience are carefully utilised to extend the wider understanding of a societal phenomenon. Additionally, Kozinets and Kedzior (2009) note that autonetnography joins the netnographic approach of observing participants with the reflexive, autobiographical form of autonetnography. For them, "the purpose of autonetnography is to provide added personal participation to the study of online cultural and communal phenomenon in order to comprehend their nuance from a necessarily and suitably engaged position, and to faithfully represent this engagement in order to provide enhanced understanding of the cultural nature of online experience." (p. 12).

More recently, Kozinets (2020) acknowledges the idea of researchers revealing their personal reflections, as operationalised in their immersion journals as a form of autoethnography, which differentially refracts the phenomenon under study. In this sense, he notes that autonetnographies are largely based on immersive data operations, and offer extensive and meticulous autobiographical and introspective detail with slight emphasis on investigative operations. For him, autonetnographies are completely suitable choices given the applicable research questions and data site contexts. In writing about an autonetnographic journey in online communities, Villegas (2018) notes that autonetnography as a form of autoethnography often concerns self-experience and relationships with others (users), the interactions and the culture of one's own people (an online community in this case). For him, introspection and reflexivity are both vital parts of netnography and are thus equally or more relevant in autonetnography. That is how he envisions autoethnography; it lies in a range between pure introspection at one extreme and insider netnography at the other.

Additionally, he notes that some autonetnographic techniques are nearly pure introspection and some are more analytical. He also proposes attention towards marketer-centred autonetnography and the opportunities that brand autonetnography offers. For him, one of the difficulties of the marketer-centred autonetnography and particularly, brand autonetnography is the need to live the experience or have access to live as an insider. This poses an opportunity for co-created autonetnography between practitioners and academics.

In the spirit of autonetnography, the lead researcher in a study on netnography and design thinking by Ashman et al. (2021) lurked among health food influencers for eight years. She continued to engage in various ways with social media health influencers and, during this time she practiced the autonetnographic procedure of personal introspection and online participation while viewing content on YouTube and Instagram. In this sense, autonetnography allowed her to develop detailed insights into the everyday workings of these platforms and to reflect on how she consumed, functioned and engaged with them. In exploring autonetnography as an eResearch methodology, Howard (2016) considered its significance as a lens through which to elucidate her understanding, while recognising and celebrating her presence as an insider scholar of network learning. In doing so, she needed to consider not only how her membership as a learner within the network learning culture, affected her sense of self and engagements with online peers and tutors, but also how her offline 'selves' as a professional (nurse and lecturer) and in her personal life as a wife, mother, grandmother, daughter and sister might have influenced her research behaviour. In this light, from her perception of what constitutes reality, she suggests that subjectivity is crucial to autonetnographic representation because one might find it difficult to detach the self from the subjective in the form of objectivity.

In writing about the renaissance of autobiographical work, which had been supressed by deconstructionist scholars, Brown (1998) notes that the autobiographical desire that is altering the liberal arts cannot fail to strike a chord with students of consumer behaviour. Apart from the expansion of 'story telling' that is apparent in, for example, the increasing use of projective techniques and analyses of consumer narratives, it is strikingly reminiscent of 'subjective personal introspection' where researchers contemplate their personal consumption experiences and endeavour to gather them in the form of an extended autobiographical essay. Patterson (2010) notes that informal

introspection is a simple recognition that we are all introspectors, which is an argument recognised by Socrates' hypothesises on thinking, which stresses that knowledge is innate and available only through introspection. Thus, informal introspection amounts to an articulation and textual interpretation of the unceasing thoughts of our minds. At heart, it is the principal of our perception that engages with the external world guiding our words, actions and feelings. He adds that well-written introspections can deliver rich stream-of-consciousness accounts of marketing-relevant research.

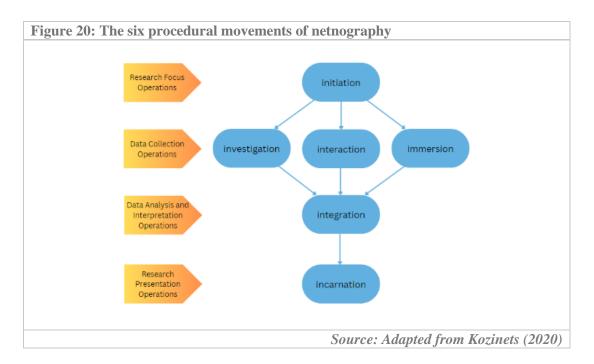
Gould (2012) links the concept of introspection to auto-netnography and notes that introspection has a long-checkered history in western academic culture ranging across a number of disciplines and under a variety of guises. Psychologists, sociologists, ethnographers, behavioral economists and consumer researchers, among others have applied, disputed and otherwise engaged with this concept, with auto-netnography being one form of introspection. He encourages researchers to explore and become attentive to their inner space in a way similar to how one is attentive to his/her outer spaces. After some experience, deconstruct those spaces or perhaps better note how they deconstruct themselves. Gould (2012) explains that narrative introspection entails telling a story, notably one's own story whereas, metacognitive introspection involves observing one's own thoughts and feelings in various ways akin to everything from cognitive response to meditation. In respect to the above discussion, which touches on the significance of autonetnography and introspection, this study adopts autonetnography in fractions as I share my introspectionesque personal experiences in relation to myself being a long-serving (and/or suffering) African Arsenal fan, who is part of Arsenal's online and offline fan communities, and a netnographer within Arsenal's official YouTube channel and AFTV. Additionally, involving autonetnography in this netnographic study enabled me to share personal reflections concerning the football club I have loved and still do for many years. These reflections arose in the process of collecting data through the immersion journals within both Arsenal's official YouTube channel and AFTV. Moreover, it was during this netnographic immersive process that I found myself showcasing similar brand equity dimensions as the communities I was conducting this netnography on. This is because I have been ingrained in the fabric of these communities for several years, thus autonetnographic introspections were fitting if not inevitable.

4.6.1.3. Procedural movements of netnography

Kozinets (2020) offers a range of varying netnographic operations by acknowledging the importance of having a systematic and disciplined research method. He classes them in four operations:

- 1. Interrogatory operations that assist us in asking improved questions.
- 2. Data-collection operations that steer a systematic and methodically structured approach to forming a dataset from a social media data site.
- 3. Data analysis, interpretation, and integration operations to offer a range of viewpoints on findings.
- 4. Presentation options for conveying results, implications and innovations.

He adds that within these four general categories, there are six operational subcategories for conducting a netnography called movements or moves. They are: 1) initiation; 2) investigation; 3) immersion; 4) interaction; 5) integration; and 6) incarnation. Figure 20 illustrates them.



1. Initiation—This movement gives the research its investigatory course. In this phase, the researcher is potentially considering many possible topics and approaches, and then develops and refines the research question(s) so that it can lead to a research design that includes netnographic inquiry (Kozinets, 2020).

- 2. Investigation—The second movement maps out the investigative space for the project. This is where the researcher tightens this expansive and expanding field of communication, treating it not just as a public forum for communication and connection, but also as a cultural research site. The movement is steered by the focus informed by the research question(s) (Kozinets, 2020).
- 3. Immersion—This movement involves the researcher's inhabitation of the bounded conceptual space of the project (Kozinets, 2020). Here, Kozinets (2020) notes that the idea of immersion is borrowed from ethnographic conceptions. Anthropologists like to compare human beings living in their culture to fish inhabiting water. According to Crossman (2018), immersion in anthropology involves a deep-level personal involvement of an individual with an object of study, whether it is a different culture, a foreign language, or a video game. In light of this, ethnographic immersion is a liquid metaphor aimed at suggesting that we dive deeply into the cultural pools of others, and not merely float along their surfaces.
- **4. Interaction**—This movement has a phase with explicit questioning or research engagement with online participants. Kozinets (2020) explains that sometimes, specific topics that are crucial to the investigation are not discussed online, or they are not talked about with enough depth. It is here that Kozinets (2020) recommends clarification is required and this is when netnographic observation usefully extends into other and associated forms of investigation such as online reviews.
- **5. Integration**—It is at this point as Kozinets (2020) puts it, integrated analysis and interpretation of the corpus of collected, co-created, and created data become a research priority. It is a continuous process of decoding, translating, cross-translating, and code-switching between parts and wholes, between data fragments and cultural understandings.
- **6. Incarnation**—Kozinets (2020) defines this movement as way of representing into concrete form. He notes that in order to finish an academic effort, it is necessary for a research study to be conveyed. Incarnation is this communication where netnographies incarnate into term papers, class projects, master's degrees and doctoral dissertations, poster sessions in conferences,

conference papers and presentations, full papers in academic proceedings, journal articles, and book chapters.

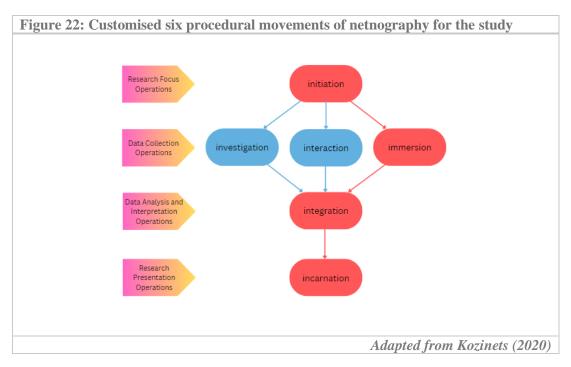
In this regard, figure 22 illustrates a customised six procedural movements of netnography for this study. It involves the following netnographic procedural movements: initiation, immersion, integration and incarnation:

- 1. Initiation—At this stage, as a researcher and football fan involved in online football fan communities, I begun observing the rapid growth of football official and Fan TV YouTube channels of football clubs. I gathered data to showcase this and contemplated on how valuable these YouTube channels are to football club brands through David Aaker's brand equity concept.
- 2. Immersion—After supervisory insight, netnography was selected as a methodological strategy to collect qualitative data (comments, in-depth conversations, screen shots etc.) and rich descriptive reflections regarding Arsenal's official YouTube channel and AFTV through immersion for the EPL season 2022/23. To conduct this, two immersion journals were utilised. For Kozinets (2020), the act of gathering information for immersion tends to be much more focused on rich data, extensively descriptive or informative data. Immersive operations attempt to preserve as much of the original context of that data as possible. This is done through recording detailed descriptions and explanations in the netnographer's immersion journal (the netnographic equivalent of the ethnographer's field notes). In this regard, the immersion journals utilised to collect field notes were: IJ 1—An immersion journal dedicated to Arsenal's official YouTube channel; and IJ 2—An immersion journal dedicated to AFTV. Excerpts from these two journals are depicted in Appendix 6 and 7 respectively.
- 3. Integration—In this movement, data collected is analysed thematically and/or theoretically. Creswell (2009) notes that during data collection, a theoretical lens becomes an advocacy perspective that guides the types of questions asked, informs how data are collected and analysed, and provides a call for action or change. This is also summarised in section 4.7 (Time horizon, data collection, and data analysis). Additionally, the data collection journey as per this study's theoretical lens is graphically depicted in appendix 5. In this sense, in a stage-by-stage basis, this study employed theoretical and/or thematic analysis to

analyse the data collected through immersion (as depicted in the immersion movement) in the following stages:

- a) Stage 1: Data collected through immersion in Arsenal's official YouTube channel and AFTV is thematically and/or theoretically interpreted into the brand equity dimensions: brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand associations in chronological order through-out the EPL season 2022/23, as it is being input into IJ 1 (an immersion journal dedicated to Arsenal's official YouTube channel) and IJ 2 (an immersion journal dedicated to AFTV).
- b) Stage 2: Once the immersion movement is complete and all the thematically and/or theoretically interpreted data is input into IJ 1 and IJ 2. This data is thematically analysed using the brand equity dimensions: brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand associations thus forming: theme 1-brand loyalty; theme 2-brand awareness; theme 3-perceived quality; and theme 4-brand associations. Under the aforementioned themes, further theoretical scrutiny and interpretation is undertaken and the result is various sub-themes under: theme1-brand loyalty; theme 2-brand awareness; theme 3-perceived quality; and theme 4-brand associations, which are presented in the next two chapters (Data analysis and findings I: Arsenal's official YouTube channel and Data analysis and findings II: AFTV).
- **4. Incarnation**—Lastly, the incarnation of this study is a PhD thesis. It is in this PhD thesis that the netnography takes shape and is offered in a presentable academic format. It is worth noting that other forms of incarnation occurred through abstracts and PowerPoint presentations. An example of this is a PowerPoint presentation at the first netnography centred conference, Netnocon 2023, at Media City, Salford, Greater Manchester (see figure 21).





4.6.1.4. Overview of digital data traces

Through immersion as a procedural movement of netnography, this study will non-obtrusively observe fans within Arsenal's official YouTube channel and AFTV, showcasing brand equity dimensions through digital data traces in the form of comments, which are technically termed as texts. Okkonen (2024) notes that researching digital traces, i.e. what was posted, commented, uploaded, asked, or just left behind in sociotechnical environments offers a vast number of research opportunities for anthropologists in the field of netnography. Additionally, digital traces are without meaning until they are contextualised and operationalised. He also

notes that the contextualisation should be conducted by domain or scientific discourse, by the context of the methods, and the context of activity system. In her robust attempt to distinguish between digital data traces, Arosio (2022) asserts that data gathered online through non-obtrusive means are often perceived as being undifferentiated and referred to as traces, which is used as a synonym for evidence. She is of the opinion that this term is inaccurate and does not reflect the complexity and rich variety of digital data. Thus, she proposes classifying them into three categories of non-obtrusive data because it enables us to understand the real nature of the data and its precise contribution to knowledge. Additionally, it enables one to match different categories of digital data to the traditional methodological approaches to which each of them belongs. Therefore, she classifies digital data traces in the following three ways:

- 1. Online found data—These are remnants of other online activities developed inadvertently by users while surfing the Internet. Online found data includes log file data, which are reports of technical operations carried out online generated automatically by computer applications. For example, access log files, request log files or email log files, mouse clicks, search requests, links, cookies and time measurements. Log file data can be utilised to develop statistics in the number of pages requested, time spent on a particular site and web browsing patterns (Arosio, 2022).
- 2. Online retrieved data—These are materials that Internet users intentionally develop and upload to the Web. They can be texts, videos, images, audio tracks, and hypertexts. Additionally, online retrieved data are created not for research reasons but to accomplish the authors' objectives (private purposes, administrative aims, communication, artistic expression, etc.) (Arosio, 2022). In this regard, the findings of this study, which are rooted from the netnographic immersion journals of Arsenal's official YouTube channel (IJ 1) and AFTV (IJ 2) fall under this category. Specifically, the communication from fans within both communities were based on videos (Arsenal's EPL match highlights for the season 2022/23, and AFTV post-match interviews for Arsenal's EPL season 2022/23 matches), and comments made by fans within both community comment sections for communication purposes. Additionally, as part of the online retrieved data, the netnographic immersion journal (IJ1) dedicated to the online football fan community based in Arsenal's official

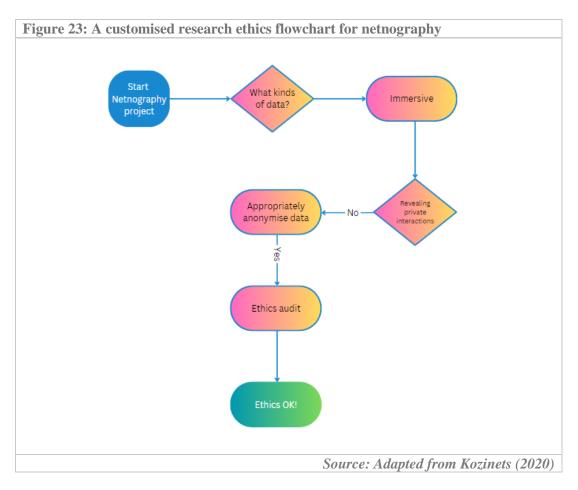
YouTube channel contained approximately 26,000 words of my own field notes fieldnotes and 122 screenshots (consisting of match thumbnails and fan comments), and the immersion journal (IJ 2) dedicated to the online football fan community based in AFTV consisted of 13,853 of my own field notes and 83 screenshots (consisting of match thumbnails and fan comments). These words were fewer in comparison to those of IJ1 largely because AFTV postfan interview viewers were fewer than those who watch match highlights on Arsenal's official YouTube channel. The quantity of data collected was considered sufficient as their timeline covered Arsenal's entire EPL season 2022/23 which began on August 5th 2022 and concluded on May 28th 2023. Moreover, the appropriate ethical protocol was followed, which included anonymising the identity of community members. This data was stored safely in immersion journals (IJ 1 and IJ2) of MS word format within the researcher's password protected Personal Computer (PC). Additionally, they were backed on the researcher's cloud storage (Google drive) and Universal Serial Bus (USB) storage device. Lastly, the aforementioned data safety measures are in line with the researcher's Data Management Plan (DMP) which was presented and accepted by the University of Salford's ethics committee.

3. Online captured data—These are behaviours, conversations, gestures, nonverbal cues and expressive movements captured simultaneously by observers while people are interacting online. For example, synchronous interactions taking place in digital contexts such as online conferences, lectures, chat rooms, and virtual worlds when actors are simultaneously connected (Arosio, 2022).

4.6.1.5. Ethics procedure for netnography

In writing about ethics in research, Resnik (2020) recommends that when conducting research on human subjects; 1) minimise harms and risks and maximise benefits; 2) respect human dignity, privacy, and autonomy; 3) take special precautions with vulnerable populations; and 4) endeavour to dispense the benefits and burdens of research fairly. Additionally, according to the World Health Organization (2024), it is essential to observe ethical principles in order to protect the dignity, rights and welfare of research participants. As such, all studies involving human beings should be

reviewed by an ethics committee to certify that the appropriate ethical standards are being upheld. In this light, the researcher confirms that this study underwent a review by the University of Salford's ethics committee to confirm that the appropriate ethical standards were upheld. It also followed a netnographic guide to ethical procedures by Kozinets (2020). In this regard, he notes that there are three unique kinds of netnographic data-collection procedures: 1) Archival search and save; 2) The capture of your own personal notes, observations, and screen captures; 3) Direct communications with people either on a public platform or through a more private mediums like direct messaging or email. These shape the exact ethical processes that a netnographer should adhere to. Figure 23 illustrates a customised research ethics flowchart for this study.



It is worth noting that the ethical application of this study perceives YouTube (where football official and Fan TV YouTube channels exist) as a 'Public site.' According to Kozinets (2020), this is an "online platform or web application that has open access to the public, does not require registration or password login, and is usually indexed by

and accessible using common search engines such as Google." (p. 182). He offers the following guidance to ethical application of netnography for public sites—They represent public information that has been conveyed under conditions that do not require special ethical procedures for netnographic study.

4.7. Time horizon, data collection techniques and procedures

The last layer of Saunders et al. (2023) research onion is time horizon. This is depicted in figure 14 and 15. Saunders and Tosey (2013) note that the last layer of the research onion, before reaching the core, depicts the time horizon over which the researcher conducts the study. Where research is undertaken to answer a question or address a problem at a specific time, this 'snapshot' is cross-sectional. Conversely, where answering the question or addressing the problem necessitates data being gathered for a prolonged period of time, the research is longitudinal, being likely to make particular use of strategies such as an experiment, action research, grounded theory and archival research. With regard to time horizon, this study aims to answer its research questions at a particular time-frame that is the EPL 2022/23 season (see figure 24). According to Tengli (2020), the inner circle of the research onion constitutes tactics which are aspects about the finer details of data collection and analysis. Table 19 illustrates the tactics used as techniques and procedures for data collection and analysis for this study. With regard to validity and reliability, Creswell (2009) explains the following:

1. Validity—In qualitative research, these are processes that qualitative researchers use to showcase the accuracy of their findings and convince readers of this accuracy. For validity of research instrument, this study utilised an initial immersion journal (pilot test immersion journal) to collect data from a match highlight of one of Arsenal's games (Brentford 2 vs Arsenal 1) within the online football fan community in Arsenal's official YouTube channel during Arsenal's EPL season 2021/22 to test whether the data collected showcased relevant results with regard to the study's research questions and theoretical lens (brand equity). The pilot study resulted in 1,296 words of my own field notes and 5 screen shots within its immersion journal. After this was done, I confirmed that indeed the pilot immersion journal was successful in capturing how football fans within the community in Arsenal's official YouTube channel showcased various dimensions of brand equity and thus

proceeded to collect data over the entire EPL season 2022/23. Thus contributing to the validity of the immersion journal as part of netnography within the larger body of work, which is this thesis—the incarnation of this research. With regard to the benefits of conducting pilot studies, Teijlingen and Hundley (2001) explain that the term 'pilot studies' refers to small versions of a full-scale study, as well as specific pre-testing of a particular research instrument. They add that pilot studies increase the likelihood of a data collection method's success, and provide the following reasons for conducting them:

- a. Developing and testing adequacy of research instruments.
- b. Assessing the feasibility of a study.
- c. Designing a research protocol.
- d. Assessing whether the research protocol is realistic and workable.
- e. Establishing whether the sampling frame and technique are effective.
- f. Assessing the proposed data analysis techniques to uncover potential problems.
- g. Training a researcher in as many elements of the research process as possible.

Additionally, In (2017) notes that through pilot studies, researchers become conscious of the processes involved in the main study, which supports the selection of the research method most appropriate for answering the research question in the main data collection stage.

2. Reliability—This refers to whether scores to items on an instrument are internally consistent, stable over time, and whether there was consistency in test administration and scoring. With regard to reliability, data collected during Arsenal's EPL 2022/23 season immersion journals (IJ 1 and IJ 2) was consistent with data collected from the pilot study immersion journal that was utilised to collect data during Arsenal's EPL season 2021/22.

Figure 24: Arsenal's 2022/23 EPL fixtures/season calendar Emirate FLY BETTE Source: Arsenal (2022)

Table 19: Techniques and procedures		
	Tactic	Relation to the study
a)	Data collection tool	This study utilises and immersion journal to collect rich, detailed and descriptive information on how football fans within football official and Fan TV YouTube channels (comment sections) showcase brand equity of football club brands.
b)	Study area	The study areas of this research are: 1) the official YouTube channel of Arsenal; and 2) AFTV, which was established by Arsenal fans. Within these study areas, observations of football fan communities within the comment section of football match highlights (official YouTube channel of Arsenal) and videos of post-match interviews (AFTV) are conducted.
c)	Research population and sampling method	The research population of this study heavily relates to the study area that is football fans who subscribe to and/or comment, and interact with fellow fans within Arsenal's official YouTube channel and AFTV. This population selection is selected through purposive sampling. According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2015) purposive sampling is done where the researcher has a clear idea of what sample units are required in accordance to the purpose of the study.
d)	Study phase	The research phase of this study focuses on the EPL 2022/23 season. These are 38 matches played from August 2022 to May 2023.
e)	Data analysis	This study utilises thematic data analysis. Creswell (2009) notes that this technique involves initial reading through of information, coding the data, creating codes and analysing thematically at times using computer programs and interpreting findings. In this study, this is done with adherence to brand equity as a theoretical lens and the research questions at hand. For Creswell (2009), during data collection, a theoretical lens becomes an advocacy perspective that guides the types of questions asked, informs how data are collected and analysed, and provides a call for action or change.
f)	Reflectivity	According to Creswell (2009), reflectivity means that researchers reflect about how their biases, values, and personal background, such as gender, history, culture, and socio-economic status, shape their interpretations formed during the course of research. This study draws upon epistemic reflexivity. Guttormsen and Moore (2023) assert that this technique improves trustworthiness and credibility in all research procedures through a systematic exploration of social scientific claims. It can be attained by the researcher scrutinising their own self, cultural practices, biases and unthought categories of thought, which, if not problematised, may limit our understanding of other individual's social reality and the research phenomena under investigation. Accordingly, a reflection is presented in the last chapter of this thesis.

4.8. Chapter summary

This chapter has discussed the study's guiding template for its research design which is Saunders et al. (2023) research onion. Thus, it has based its topics on the peeling of this research onion from its outer layers to the core of the onion being data collection techniques and procedures. In this light, it has depicted the study's philosophical approach to theory (interpretivism), the methodological choice (mono-method qualitative), the research strategy (netnography as an adaptation of ethnography), and the time horizon (cross-sectional). It has closed by showcasing the study's various data collection techniques and provided a chapter summary. The next chapter depicts this study's data analysis and findings.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS I: ARSENAL'S OFFICIAL YOUTUBE CHANNEL

5.1.Introduction

Before embarking on the data analysis and findings that focus on: How brand equity exists within the football fan community of Arsenal's official YouTube channel, it is worth noting, as explained in chapter 4, that this study's netnography followed Arsenal's EPL season 2022/23 (see figure 25). Therefore, this chapter provides the key themes and sub-themes that were prevalent as per a theoretical and/or thematic data interpretation process based on Aaker (1991) brand equity concept. Additionally, the netnographic immersion journal for this online football fan community (IJ1) contained approximately 26,000 words and 122 screenshots, and the appropriate ethical protocol was followed, which included anonymising the identity of community members. Thus, this chapter highlights the following themes: 1) Brand loyalty; 2) Brand awareness; 3) Perceived Quality; and 4) Brand associations, and their various sub-themes. It then concludes with a chapter summary. Moreover, as the aforementioned themes are based on Aaker (1991) brand equity concept and its dimensions (brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand associations), they also act as a guide for how this chapter is arranged.



5.1.1. Football jargon, icons and the Arsenal team

Figure 26 provides an example of Arsenal's football match highlights as seen on the club's official YouTube channel. It depicts Arsenal vs Liverpool (3-2), which was played at the club's home stadium, the Emirates Stadium. Hence the red and white football kits the players, Bukayo Saka and Gabriel Martinelli (in the image) are wearing, and the thumbnail's red and white graphic colour scheme. When Arsenal played away from home (the opponent's stadium), they wore their away kit, which is black in colour, as depicted in the match highlights of their game against Fulham (0-3). Hence, the black coloured colour scheme for the thumbnail's graphic. Arsenal also has a third team kit (mainly pink in colour), which they wore to avoid colour clashing their second kit (black) with an opponent's first team kit when they played away games. An example of this is in their away match vs Crystal Palace (0-2). Hence, the pink and navy-blue colour scheme for the match's thumbnail.

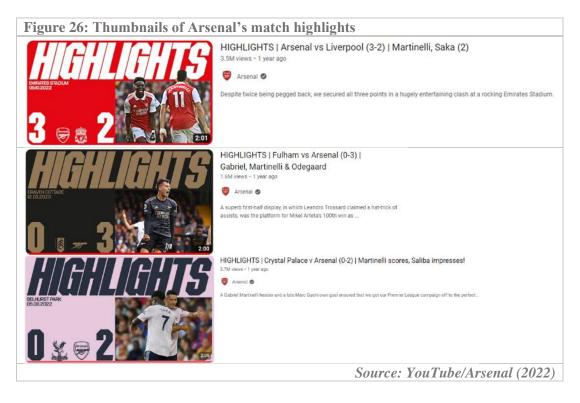


Figure 27 presents Arsenal's first team squad for the EPL season 2022/23. It is worth noting that the players Leandro Trossard, Jakub Kiwior and Jorge Luiz Frello Filho Cavaliere OMRI (Order of Merit of the Italian Republic), also known as Jorginho were recruited in the middle of the season (January/Winter transfer window), hence they

are missing from the first team squad's photograph that is often taken before the new season begins.

Figure 27: Arsenal's first team squad, 2022/23



Front Row: Oleksandr Zinchenko, Ben White, Bukayo Saka, Martin Odegaard (team captain), Mikel Arteta (team manager), Granit Xhaka, Gabriel Jesus, Kieran Tierney and Thomas Partey

Middle Row: Fabio Vieira, Gabriel Martinelli, Takehiro Tomiyasu, Gabriel Magalhaes, William Saliba, Rob Holding, Mohamed Elneny, Emile Smith Rowe and Eddie Nketiah Back Row: Marquinhos, Albert Sambi Lokonga, Karl Hein, Aaron Ramsdale, Matt Turner, Reiss Nelson and Cedric Soares

Source: Arsenal (2022)

In football and within Arsenal's official YouTube channel, football fans had a variety of jargon (words, short hand names and nicknames) that were and are commonly used to depict field positions, stadiums and team players. For ease of reference within this chapter, these key words are as follows:

GK: Goal Keeper RB: Right Back CB: Center Back LB: Left Back

DM: Defensive Midfielder **AM:** Attacking Midfielder

RW: Right Winger LW: Left Winger ST: Striker

Home: Arsenal's home stadium, the Emirates stadium

Away: Opponents' stadiums

Gunners/Gooners: Nicknames for the Arsenal team and their fans

COYG: Come on You Gunners/Gooners - a supportive slogan for Arsenal

Star boy: Arsenal winger Bukayo Saka's nickname

Zinny: Arsenal left back Oleksandr Zinchenko's nickname

Invincibles: Arsenal's unbeaten team for the EPL season 2003/04

5.2.Brand loyalty

Under the theme of brand loyalty, a dimension of Aaker (1991) brand equity concept, loyalty towards the Arsenal brand is presented under the following sub-themes: 1) Ritual texts; 2) Conscious brand loyalty texts; and 3) Subconscious brand loyalty.

5.2.1. Ritual texts

These are texts that showcase loyalty to the Arsenal brand through ritual watching of the team's highlights on Arsenal's official YouTube channel by Arsenal fans. Within the comment section of Arsenal's match highlights vs Leicester City where the team won 2-0 at home, one fan shared his/her remarks. The fan said, 'As true Arsenal fans, we watch the match live and still rush to watch the highlights \(\circ\) \(\circ\).' This comment suggests that for the fan, something true Arsenal fans do is watch the full game and then watch the highlights of the same game later. This is seconded by a fan who replied, 'Facts,' which is a modern way of saying, that or this is true. From a brand equity perspective, this shows the importance of match-highlights to both these fans as a ritualistic way for them to express loyalty towards the Arsenal brand—through repetitive watching of the team's match highlights. Indeed, there is a fan who replied \(\circ\) \(\circ\) \(\circ\) \(\circ\) that's how we love Arsenal \(\circ\).' In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Chelsea 1-0 away from home, some fans exhibited support for match highlights and the frequency of watching them:

Comment

Fan 1: My Heart smiles when Arsenal win. And I end up watching these highlights I don't even know how many times, [™]

Replies

Fan 2: Same 😂 🤎 💛

Fan 3: Same here. You're not alone. I watch the Spurs highlights the most. I can't get enough of the Partey screamer.

Source: IJ 1

From a brand equity perspective, Fan 1 showcases his/her loyalty to the Arsenal brand through repetitive watching of Arsenal's match highlights. This is as a result of his/her feelings towards Arsenal. Fan 2 shares the same sentiment. Fan 3 does so too, and adds that he/she prefers watching Arsenal's match highlights when the team plays against their arch rivals Tottenham Hotspurs (*'Spurs'*). Arsenal's home match vs Tottenham Hotspurs finished 3-1 to Arsenal, and Thomas Partey scored an excellent goal from a

long distance. In football slang, this is known as Fan 3 puts it, a 'screamer.' In the reverse fixture, away from home, where Arsenal defeated Tottenham Hotspurs 2-0, one fan said, 'I watched the match but I just come here to watch these highlights over and over again. So proud of our boys. Everything just feels right.' In this case, the fan watched the live match, and as a ritual, he/she has joined the online community to watch the match highlights 'over and over again.' Thus, for the aforementioned fans, Arsenal match highlights have become or already were a part of Arsenal's brand, and these fans are expressing their loyalty towards Arsenal by repetitively watching the team's match highlights, after watching the team's live match.

5.2.2. Conscious brand loyalty texts

In the context of this study, conscious brand loyalty occurs when a fan knowingly showcases his/her loyalty to a football club brand. Specifically, the fan means and wants to show that he/she is a loyal supporter of a football club. In this regard, one football fan consciously confessed his/her long-time support for Arsenal over the years. The fan said, '24 years of becoming an Arsenal fan, since 1998 when I was still six years old, been supporting this club through the ups and downs, thank God finally we could see a glimpse of our beloved club back on track to become a title contender again. From a brand equity perspective, this is loyalty for the Arsenal brand whereby, the fan shows the following: 1) The number of years he/she has supported the club; 2) The year he/she started supporting the club; 3) His/her age when he/she started supporting the club; and 4) The circumstances (good or bad) he/she has supported the club through. With regard to match highlights where Arsenal defeated Fulham 2-1, there was a fan who said, 'I do not miss one game from Arsenal: Young squad, lots of talent and strategic plays, great coaching from Arteta. Hope they keep the momentum and play equally good or even better.' This comment exemplifies a combination of various brand equity elements, however, the strongest one is brand loyalty when the fan states, 'I do not miss one game from Arsenal...' The rest of the comment shows reasons pertaining to the conscious brand loyalty element of the comment. Nevertheless, there is brand awareness whereby the fan is aware of the team as: 1) A 'young squad with lots of talent.'; 2) A team with a strategic aspect to their game; and 3) Great coaching from the team manager, in this case Mikel Arteta.

In this light, with regard to match highlights where Arsenal lost 3-1 to Manchester United away from home, a fan said, 'I have been supporting Arsenal for all my life (since 98)...through the highs and the many lows. This was not a poor performance; we did many things right and 3 things wrong...many of our fellow gooners are literally nit piking and saying things other pundits & rival fans said - reality we were going to lose like it or not. Let's support the team, Arteta and the boys are trying for us and have laid a solid foundation down in the league!!! Top 4 no exceptions of course and a cup won't hurt this season, great job to the boys for the performance yday! (yesterday) we move. From a brand equity perspective, this is a form of conscious brand loyalty towards the Arsenal brand when the fan states that he/she has been supporting Arsenal since 1998. Suffice to say that this is almost older than I have been alive as I was four years old at the time and it was roughly six years before I was started supporting Arsenal in Nairobi. It is also worth noting that the fan is using his/her loyalty towards Arsenal for justification purposes. Thus, the fan is trying to justify why the Arsenal loss was not a 'poor performance' through his/her loyalty to the club. Additionally, the fan remains loyal to the Arsenal brand despite the team's loss to Manchester United. Indeed, another fan shares close to the same sentiments. The fan said, 'One of the best performances I have ever seen from Arsenal at Old Trafford (The fans were loud in a noisy Old Trafford, The players really fought hard), game by game, onto the next. Love you, Arsenal.' And another said, 'I love this Club with all my heart. Amazing performance, but results. Keep fighting hard. See my boys on Thursday and Sunday. We want wins 2 plus goals $\stackrel{\wedge}{\bullet}$.' It is worth noting that the fan consciously shows loyalty to the Arsenal brand by mentioning that he/she will still continue watching the next two games ('Thursday and Sunday') despite the team's negative result.

In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Tottenham Hotspurs 3-1 at home, one fan said, 'Love my team, phenomenal form...win or lose, die hard Gunner ♥.' What could be interesting here, is the use of the phrase 'die hard...,' which is quite strong and reminds me of the blockbuster Die Hard films where the main character John McClane (played by Bruce Willis) remains true to his heroic cause despite all the ordeals he has to go through. The phrase also expresses the feeling of one being a soldier dying for his/her country or battalion, thus the fan is consciously showcasing

his/her 'die hard' brand loyalty to the Arsenal brand whether the team has positive or negative on-field performances.

In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Leeds United 1-0 away from home one fan showed appreciation for Arsenal's winger, Bukayo Saka. The fan said, 'Saka with an impossible goal... what an angle 📛 📛 🙌 the cup is ours 🤘 Arsenal for life...!!!!' From a brand equity perspective, this fan is showcasing conscious brand loyalty towards the Arsenal brand through their appreciation for the player Bukayo Saka. This is cemented by the phrase 'Arsenal for life.' Similarly, another fan said, 'Yeah it was a tough game but we used our experience to win the match, Arsenal for life & . 'In the same match highlights where Arsenal defeated Leeds United 1-0 away from home, there was a fan who shared a unique story as to when he/she began supporting Arsenal. The fan said, 'This club fell in my heart ♥ since childhood!! When I was a child, I even don't know the name of this club but the identity to me was (red \forall and white \bigcirc) colours $\stackrel{\triangle}{=}$ of shirts. From a brand equity perspective, this is a form of conscious brand loyalty towards the Arsenal brand through Arsenal's home kit colours (red and white). A key aspect to note here is that the fan did not begin his/her loyalty for Arsenal by being aware of the team's brand name, but rather, the red and white Arsenal brand colours.

In the match highlights where Arsenal lost 3-1 to Manchester City, at home, one fan said, 'I'm still with you Arsenal, win or lose. My heart will always be there for ya Head's up guys.' From a brand equity perspective, this is a form of conscious brand loyalty despite the team's negative on-field performance. However, concerning the same match highlights, one fan began his/her remarks on a harsh note but progressed into consciously expressing their loyalty towards the Arsenal brand. The fan said, 'We're still miles away for the title. Look how they outplayed us in the 2nd half. To be in top 4 with 80% of young players is an achievement but we need to get into business again to be the title contenders. COYG how they outplayed us in the Brentford draw, for me personally. All I can do is pray and support you guys till the end. Whatever will be, will be. Still believe in you all.' The two aforementioned comments suggest that despite the feeling of discontent the team's defeat to Manchester City caused, both fans consciously showcased their loyalty to the Arsenal brand. Additionally, the latter

fan used the phrase 'Whatever will be, will be,' which is common in Spanish and Italian communities who use the phrase 'Che será, será' (Italian) and 'Lo que será, será' (Spanish). It showcases a feeling of acceptance to the notion that the future is out of our control, that occurrences will take place as they are supposed to, irrespective of endeavours to affect them. In this sense, despite the surrender of control towards futuristic events for the Arsenal team in the EPL, as depicted through the term, 'Whatever will be, will be' or 'Che será, será' (Italian)/'Lo que será, será' (Spanish), the fan will remain loyal to the Arsenal team.

In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Chelsea 1-0 away from home, some fans who consciously shared their loyalty to the Arsenal brand were involved in the following discussion:

Comment

Fan 1: Been a fan of this club since 2014 and trust me this is by far the best time to be an Arsenal fan ♥ from primary school now I'm in College

Replies:

Fan 2: Since 2002

Fan 3: Soon to be 10 years of being a gooner

Fan 4: I'm from 2k18 lol (2k18 - 2018)

Fan 5: Fan since 1997 since Bergkamp n Ian wright era, this season brings back good memories. So happy for this team

Fan 6: one second, it's 1999 and Martin Tyler is screaming "Kanu believe it!" after Kanu scored a hat trick at Stamford bridge and made me a fan. The next second it's 2022 and I'm almost 30.

Source: IJ 1

Here, all six fans are consciously showcasing their loyalty to the Arsenal brand. Fan 1, 2, 5 and 6 have been loyal since the late 90s-early-2000s. Fan 1 and 3 have been loyal to the Arsenal brand since the early 2010s. Fan 4 has been loyal to the Arsenal brand since 2018, which is not too long ago. Additionally, in the case of these 6 fans, their conscious loyalty to the Arsenal brand is almost like a badge of honour. In the same vein, in different match highlights, where Arsenal defeated Tottenham Hotspurs 2-0 away from home, there was a comment which catalysed a conversation on loyalty:

Comment

Fan 1: "When you start supporting a football club, you don't support it because of the trophies, or a player, or history, you support it because you found yourself somewhere there; found a place where you belong." Dennis Bergkamp. edit= thanks for the 4.5k likes

Replies

Fan 2: DB10 FOREVER (DB10 – Dennis Berkamp's shirt number was 10)

Fan 3: I became an Arsenal fan in 2009 can you imagine that 😂 🤣

Fan 4: Relatable I found myself supporting Arsenal and never left even when they lost

Fan 5: My English name (is Dennis) because of Bergkamp's influence

Fan 6: I supported Arsenal because of Lacazette. But then over time grew into watching them play. Wow this season has been amazing. (I've followed Laca since he was at Lyon)

Fan 7: I support Arsenal for the multiple reasons every Gooner does but the 3 main reasons were Henry, my favourite auntie, and the fans. Seeing how passionate, loyal and caring the Arsenal fans were as a kid during the 2000s just got to me

Fan 8: No, most people start supporting because of a certain player. It was Henry for me!

Source: IJ 1

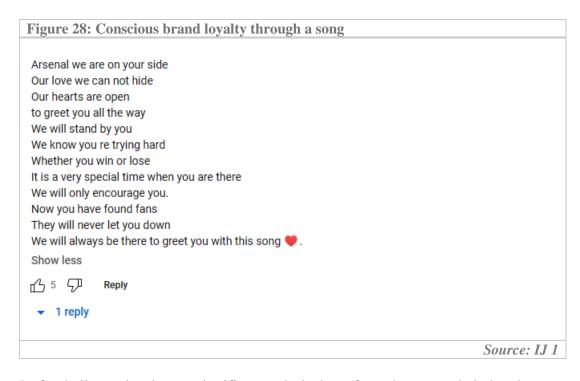
For Fans 1, 2 and 5, Dennis Berkamp, Arsenal's former creative striker from Holland, who is also an Invincible, is a special player for them and has played an integral role in their loyalty to the Arsenal brand. Fan 5 even confesses that he/she is named after him. For Fan 6, Alexandar Lacazette, Arsenal's former striker from France, had an influence on his/her loyalty to the Arsenal brand. For Fan 7, Thierry Henry, his/her auntie, and the positive qualities of Arsenal fans around him in the 2000s played an influence in his/her loyalty towards the Arsenal brand. For Fan 8, it was Thierry Henry. Thierry Henry is considered to be Arsenal's and the EPL's greatest player. He hails from France and played as a striker for Arsenal. Additionally, just like Dennis Berkamp, he is also part of Arsenal's Invincibles' team. Theirry Henry and Dennis Berkamp can be seen as Arsenal's historical icons who are still immensely relevant in some of the fans' lives as Arsenal supporters. As an Arsenal fan, I can personally relate to this. However, my favourite historical Arsenal icon is Francesc Fabregas. He played an integral role in my loyalty to Arsenal because he exemplified courage, strength, technical skills, and leadership as Arsenal's 21-year-old captain, who did not let his young age limit him from taking on an enormous leadership role in 2008. At the time, I was the youngest student in my secondary school class, which came with its challenges as I was often an easy target for some older students. Thus, watching Fabregas at 21 years of age, becoming captain of Arsenal was an immense inspiration

to both my Arsenal loyalty and as an individual. This showed me that age is just a number.

In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Manchester United 3-2 at home, and where the team scored a dramatic late winning goal, one fan said, 'This match meant everything to them today and to us as Arsenal fans. I've been supporting Arsenal for years and this feels so good knowing where we are coming from. So proud of this team and Arteta. Trust the process coyg.' From a brand equity perspective, this fan is consciously showcasing his/her loyalty to the Arsenal brand by noting that they have 'been supporting Arsenal for years.' Additionally, this is through their appreciation for the team's manager Mikel Arteta and thus notes 'trust the process.' In football, this is a phrase used to encourage patience and confidence in the team manager's long-term strategy to move the team to greater heights.

In the match highlights where Arsenal drew 1-1 with Brentford at home, one fan shared the following sentiments despite the unfavourable match result. 'If we're all 100% honest with ourselves, at the start of the season, what was our realistic target in our own minds? I will honestly say that I wanted a Champions League place, top 4, so to be where we are now is absolutely unbelievable and I never expected us to have spent so long at the top of the Premier League. To actually be in a title race with the phenomenally talented and experienced Man City is far beyond my wildest dreams so I'll gladly take whatever we get. Our squad is the youngest in the League, they have never been here and The Arsenal hasn't been in a title race for years... as long as the lads give their all for the shirt, I'll be a happy Gooner. Good luck lads, keep up the fantastic work and WE'RE ALL BEHIND YOU 100%!!!!!!!!

From a brand equity perspective, the fan is consciously showcasing that he/she will remain loyal to the Arsenal brand despite the 1-1 result against Brentford at home. In this case, Arsenal's progress over the course of the EPL season has outweighed the slightly disappointing result of one game. Indeed, despite the result, one fan shared a song to show his/her support for the team (see figure 28). This is an example of a creative way of consciously showcasing loyalty to the Arsenal brand despite a slightly negative on-field performance.



In football, music plays a significant role in how fans showcase their loyalty to a football club. For Liverpool fans, the song, 'You'll Never Walk Alone' has become a choir-like stadium anthem that garnishes the stadium atmosphere with voices of fans who in that moment come together in perfect unity and sound to support their club. On a slightly non-musical note, in the highlights where Arsenal defeated Leicester City 1-0 away from home, one fan said, 'Backing Arsenal is not for the faint of heart. I'm sad that Trossard's goal doesn't count but well done. COYG from Trinidad TT.' TT is short hand for Trinidad and Tobago. Here, the fan consciously showcases his/her loyalty towards the Arsenal brand, however, in a somewhat negative way by cautioning people that showing loyalty to Arsenal is 'not for the faint in heart.' This was because Arsenal vs Leicester City 1-0 was a tough and close match where Arsenal prevailed as the winners. As an Arsenal fan, I can personally relate to the notion that supporting 'Arsenal is not for the faint of heart ' as I too have been on an emotional rollercoaster in my loyalty to the club. In my early days as an Arsenal fan in Nairobi, there were times I used to change the television channel during the dying minutes of an Arsenal match because of the gut-wrenching emotional tension that came with hoping that the team would maintain a slender lead until the end of a match. My mother never understood why, but soon enough she too became a football fan because of my influence on her, and during tense penalty shootouts in tournaments such as the UEFA

Euros and FIFA World Cup, she grabs the remote and is tempted to change the channel. Truly football fanship and loyalty at times, is 'not for the faint of heart.'

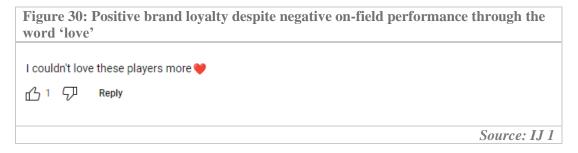
It is worth noting that the 'TT' shorthand seemed to have encouraged fans from Trinidad and Tobago to showcase their national identity as Arsenal supporters (see figure 29).

In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Crystal Palace 4-1, an Ethiopian fan said, 'I remember the time when I was at junior High where Wenger's Arsenal made my Ethiopian teenage heart melt with winning the league in beautiful style. Since then this is the time with God which we deserve for the loyal fans around the world. Thanks for this Hope!' The fan is consciously showcasing his loyalty to the Arsenal brand, which he/she has supported since the 2003/04 season, or Arsenal's Invincibles' season, and identifies himself as one of the 'loyal fans around the world.' Additionally, Arsene Wenger, Arsenal's longest serving team manager who managed the team from 1996 – 2018, was the manager when the Invincibles' team won the EPL in season 2003/04. As a Kenyan Arsenal fan from the same Eastern African region, I can attest that there is indeed a large Arsenal fan base in the region, which often pays respect to Arsenal's longest serving manager Arsene Wenger. Apart from this, I notice that the fan mentions '...is the time with God which we deserve ...' which is a way of acknowledging his/her faith in his/her loyalty to Arsenal. This can be linked the historical growth of Christianity in Ethiopia, which has the world's oldest Christian denomination known as The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, which stands on the Tewahedo doctrine meaning 'Unity' (the solitary unified nature of Christ) in the ancient semitic language of Ge'ez.



In the match highlights where Arsenal drew 3-3 at home to Southampton, one fan said 'To every Arsenal fan at the start of the season, we didn't expect this and we should be more proud of our team more than anything. This game was crucial because it was played towards the end of the season and Arsenal were in a tight title race with Manchester City for the EPL's top position. Thus, the draw did not do Arsenal any favours. However, the fan still consciously displays his/her loyalty towards the Arsenal brand by urging fellow fans to be 'more proud' of the 'team more than anything.' In the next game, Arsenal lost 4-1 away to Manchester City. In the match highlights for that game, one fan said, 'Keep fighting lads. No matter what happens we will always be behind u. COYG. 'The fan is consciously showcasing his/her loyalty to the Arsenal brand in that 'no matter what happens' he/she will keep supporting the team. Another fan said, 'It has been a fantastic and positive season regardless, even if it feels a bit disappointing now it only feels that way because the boys overachieved so hard this campaign. I hope we can strengthen, bring in a strong backup at CB if Kiwior is deemed not ready, and get in Rice and/or Caicedo. Hope to see Trossard and Reiss both given more of a chance next season as well, both have contributed big performances for us this year and tbh (to be honest) have earned a spot already. COYG forever.' Here, the fan is subconsciously showcasing his/her loyalty to the Arsenal brand by urging the team through the fan slogan 'COYG' and the word 'forever.'

In the match highlights where Arsenal lost to Brighton & Hove Albion 3-0 at home, one fan shared his/her sentiments. This is illustrated in figure 30.



Here, the fan is consciously showcasing loyalty to the Arsenal brand by noting that he/she loves the players, who are part of the Arsenal brand even 'more' despite their negative on-field performance, and eventual loss of the title race to Manchester City. As an Arsenal fan, and on a personal level, this exemplifies what true conscious loyalty to a club and even someone is. It goes beyond financial ties and repetitive buyer

behaviour and moves into the realm of humanity on a deep philosophical, emotional. and spiritual level. It shows that even when the Arsenal players did not achieve what most fans would have wished, which is to win the EPL title after many years of waiting, the fan whose comment is depicted in figure 30, chose to love the players even more. To love the players even more, which is arguably at their lowest point in football, when their entire EPL title chase came crashing down with a humiliating 4-1 away defeat to Manchester City on a pitiful April evening at the Etihad stadium. In this sense, as a part of humanity, and on a theistic philosophical level, this is how God, our creator sees humanity, He never gives up on us. Even at our lowest pitiful moments, when we have deeply failed and are sadly wedged in the muddy trenches of life, He loves us even more; this is true conscious loyalty.

5.2.3. Subconscious brand loyalty texts

In the context of this study, subconscious brand loyalty occurs when a fan unknowingly showcases his/her loyalty to a football club brand. Specifically, the fan doesn't mean to show that he/she is a loyal supporter of a football club, and does so un-intentionally. In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Tottenham Hotspurs, their arch rivals 3-1 at home in what is known as the 'North London Derby,' Thomas Partey, Arsenal's defensive midfielder scored an excellent goal from quite a long distance. One fan said, 'If you've been watching Partey for the past two seasons you'd know he's been trying that shot and never got it right... spot on Partey! If you fail keep trying till you succeed!' From a brand equity perspective, the fan notes that he/she has been watching Thomas Partey trying to score such a goal for some time (two seasons), which can be seen as subconscious brand loyalty towards the Arsenal brand whereby; the fan is not necessarily trying to showcase his/her loyalty towards Arsenal but has done it subconsciously by stating that he/she has been following the team for at least two seasons. Furthermore, the fan is doing this by noticing Partey efforts to score this goal for two seasons. In the reply section of the aforementioned comment, there is a comment from in Swahili, my home country's national language. He/she said, 'Ukweli kabisa. Tena usisahau huyo kaka ana bidii sana!' which in English means, 'This is very true. Don't forget, that brother is very hard working.' As I noted earlier, this emphasises that the two fans have subconsciously showcased loyalty to the Arsenal brand by noticing Thomas Partey trying to score such a goal for the past

two seasons. In light of this, another fan said, 'Finally Partey scores from outside the box,' and another said, 'his shots were getting closer each time and finally it went in on the perfect day.' In another Thomas Partey-related comment, one fan said, 'I have been saying for seasons that Thomas Partey is one of our best players and I think that he straight up is, every game that he isn't there for us we don't find what he does when others play in his position, this game right here has made me certain that he's our most key player, one of the best midfielders in the whole league.' From a brand equity perspective, the use of the words 'I have been saying this for seasons...' shows a subconscious expression of brand loyalty through a constant sharing of an opinion about Thomas Partey by the fan.

Under the same match highlights, where Arsenal defeated Tottenham Hotspurs 3-1 at home, a fan said, 'it's no fluke, it's no coincidence, it's a well-constructed win, well planned, well coached, proper win. The way they've been playing this season is amazing. Anyone who watches and understands football would notice that there's a clear scheme for every situation. Arteta takes care of every tiny detail. Sure there'll be mismatches and miscalculations (just like the man united match – Manchester United match) cause they're all just humans who made mistakes but we all know this team is in good hands and they'll bounce straight back from adversity. I really hope they win a trophy, and when it happens, we Arsenal fans who have been through countless bad moments this past decade could feel truly proud.' From a brand equity perspective, this fan is subconsciously showcasing brand loyalty towards the Arsenal brand through sharing his/her experience of being through countless negative moments over a period of years as an Arsenal fan.

In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Leeds United 1-0 away from home, there was a fan who shared a sentiment about Bukayo Saka. The fan said, 'What a goal by Saka. Star boy has grown so much.' The name 'Star boy' is Bukayo Saka's nickname and is linked to his Nigerian ethnic background. In Nigeria, when a young man is called 'Star boy', it means they shine and excel in whatever they do. From a brand equity perspective, the fan is subconsciously showing loyalty to the Arsenal brand as he/she has been following Bukayo Saka's journey from a young first team player, fresh from the Arsenal academy into the prolific player he has become. In the match highlights of the same game, one fan said, 'Having been an Arsenal fan for some time, I must admit it feels surreal seeing my team do so well it's almost as if we're

undeserving of the top spot since it hasn't happened since the glory days.' From a brand equity perspective, this fan is subconsciously showcasing brand loyalty. He/she is not necessarily aiming to show their loyalty but rather, the fact that it feels 'surreal' to watch Arsenal do well since Arsenal's 'Glory days.'

In a game where Arsenal defeated Tottenham Hotspurs 2-0 away from home, some fans subconsciously showcased their loyalty towards the Arsenal brand. The following conversation encapsulates this:

Comment

Fan 1: This team is making us so proud. After SO MANY years of pain and struggles (especially the last 5 years). Finally we are playing such good football and preforming so well and there is much unity and passion from every single player now. COYG ♥ ♥.

Replies:

Fan 2: The pains and struggles lasted for about 10 years

Fan 3: Unai emery's era is the worst

Fan 4: Past 10 years have Been a weird time with awesome moments. This feels like something big. And what a catch to get Martin

Non-fan 1: Don't give hope to yourself body, Man city will destroy your team when you face them, they will be EPL champions, and Arsenal will not even qualify for the Champions league, be sure about that. Keep this comment and we will talk in June

Fan 5: you are the type of fan that will switch to another club after your team flops... don't be ashamed of that... it's just your nature...

Source: IJ 1

From a brand equity perspective, four fans (Fans 1, 2, 3 and 4) do not necessarily want to showcase their loyalty to the Arsenal brand but are doing so by attempting to showcase the pain they've endured by watching Arsenal's negative on-field performances especially when Unai Emery (Arsenal's former team manager from 2018-2019) was in charge. Non-fan 1 can be classed as a 'troller,' a non-Arsenal football fan who simply wants to discourage Arsenal fans. In doing so (trolling), this troller has catalysed Fan 5 to showcase true loyalty to a football club and the Arsenal brand, thus Fan 5 notes that Non-fan 1 is a disloyal fan who will support another team when the team he/she currently supports starts playing badly ('flops'). This is also because Fan 5 assumes the Non-fan is a Manchester City supporter. In the EPL football fan community, it is common for fans of other clubs to suspect the club loyalty (or Brand loyalty) of new Manchester City fans due to the team's recent on-field success. Additionally, because of the huge financial investment Manchester City have received in recent years from the Abu Dhabi United Group (ADUG), a private equity

organisation owned by Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan of the Abu Dhabi Royal Family.

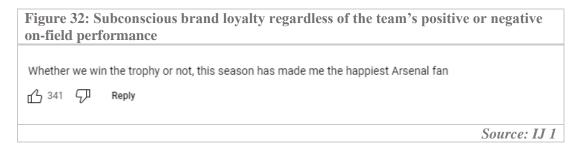
In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Manchester United 3-2 at home, Arsenal's English striker Eddie Nketiah scored two goals. One of them was a late dramatic winner towards the end of the game to make it Arsenal 3, Manchester United 2. In this light, one fan said, 'Eddie deserved all the recognition and appreciation for his hard work. He's been working hard for these moments. Tonight we fought as a team and won as a team \(\Phi\)\(\Phi\)\(\Phi\).' Another fan replied, 'I knew he had it in him. It's like watching a guy go from a boy to a man. He had the chance to get the experience these last few games which he needed to gain the confidence to be a clinical goal scorer. Having a hale end youth come up and reach this level is like gold, what an asset to the club.' Here, both fans are subconsciously showing their loyalty towards the Arsenal brand. The first fan indicates this by noting that he/she has observed Eddie Nketiah working hard in order to achieve positive on-field performances, and the second fan indicates this by showcasing his/her followership of Eddie Nketia's journey as a young Arsenal academy (Hale End) graduate to the first team player he has become.

In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Fulham 3-0 away from home, a fan said, 'What a great time to be alive as an Arsenal fan.' Another fan replied, 'Wish it was like this when I was in secondary school, but hey better late than never.' Here, the second fan subconsciously shows his/her loyalty to the Arsenal brand by noting that he/she was supporting Arsenal in secondary school. In the same vein, another fan said, 'After 15 years supporting Arsenal, finally we can enjoy.' Again, here, the fan isn't intentionally showcasing that he/she has been loyal to the Arsenal brand for fifteen or more years. The fan is subconsciously doing so, with the intention of showing how long he/she has waited to watch Arsenal prospering in their on-field competitions. Concerning the same match where Arsenal defeated Fulham 3-0, a fan subconsciously showcased loyalty to the Arsenal brand through his/her recollection of Francesc Fabregas, Arsenal's former player who captained Arsenal and contributed immensely to the team before leaving for Barcelona, his childhood club, in 2011 (see figure 31). Again, the fan does not intentionally showcase that he/she has been loyal to the Arsenal brand from 2009 and beyond, but he/she is subconsciously showing this by noting Francesc Fabregas' all-time record of assists in the first half, and how

Leandro Trossard has achieved it. Additionally, in football, a hat-trick means three. This term originates from cricket; when a bowler struck the wicket three times in a row, he/she often received a hat from his/her cricket club as a gift, hence the term 'hat trick.'



The above comment received a reply from a fan who said, 'wasn't it Cazorla against Wigan?' And another fan replied, 'it was and he created a record of his own the only player to have a hat-trick of goals and a hat-trick of assists in the same season.' It is worth noting that Santiago 'Santi' Cazorla is Arsenal's former Spanish midfielder who left the club in 2018. In light of this, both fans aren't intentionally showcasing that they have been loyal to the Arsenal brand from 2018 and beyond, but they are subconsciously doing so by attempting to showcase their knowledge of Santi Cazorla's record ('a hat-trick of goals and hat-trick of assists in the same season'). In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Newcastle 2-0 away from home, one fan expressed his/her happiness because of Arsenal. This is illustrated in figure 32.



Here, the fan is not necessarily trying to showcase his/her loyalty towards Arsenal but subconsciously does so by noting that he/she is 'the happiest Arsenal fan' whether Arsenal wins the EPL trophy due to positive on-field performances or not. This also suggests that happiness with the Arsenal team is not necessarily attached to winning the EPL title for the fan. He/she is simply happy that the team bravely endeavoured to win it. For the fan, it is the team's effort that truly matters.

In the match highlights where Arsenal lost to Brighton & Hove Albion 3-0 at home, one fan said, 'The season has been amazing. Thank you to, the players and staff, for their hard work and dedication. Gutted at how it ended but we move on and try to do our best in the last two matches!' In a bittersweet way, this fan is subconsciously showcasing his/her loyalty to the Arsenal brand by urging the team to do their best in the 'last two matches' of the EPL season. The use of the word 'gutted' to showcase extreme heartbreak and disappointment stems from English slang. It is likened to the pain caused by the literal procedure of removing an animal's internal organs (guts). Additionally, the fan is extremely hurt by the way Arsenal's title charge was crumbling as depicted in the 3-0 home defeat to Brighton & Hove Albion towards the end of the season, and is consciously acknowledging the pain he/she succumbed to, all while urging the team to try their best in the last two EPL matches. However, in doing so, he/she is subconsciously showing loyalty to the Arsenal brand by encouraging them to do their best despite being 'gutted' by the game's result.

In the match highlights of Arsenal's last game, they defeated Wolverhampton Wanderers 5-0 at home. Despite losing the EPL title to Manchester City, one fan said, 'This is how the season had to end. The sun is shining, the fans are singing, and the players gave us such a show. I can't wait for the first UCL game next season, the anthem will give me goose bumps for sure. Come on in the summer window!' Here, the fan doesn't necessarily want to showcase his/her loyalty to Arsenal, but is subconsciously doing so by noting that he/she is eager to watch Arsenal compete in the UEFA Champions League (UCL), Europe's top tear football club tournament next season. By finishing second in the EPL, Arsenal earned qualification to the UCL. The tournament is also garnished by a familiar anthem before every game, which is loved by football fans. It is officially titled 'Champions League' and is based on Frideric Handel's Zadok the Priest. Additionally, it was arranged by Tony Britten in 1992 and performed by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, and sung by the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields Chorus. In the same match highlights where Arsenal defeated Wolverhampton Wanderers 5-0 at home, one fan said, 'Thank you Arsenal for this season, it was a difficult year for me mentally, but all those Arsenal wins and the attractive football they play this year brought me some joy that I needed, we didn't win a league but I'm proud of this team and I'm excited for next season.' Despite going through a difficult year mentally, the fan is not consciously showcasing his/her loyalty

to the Arsenal brand, but is subconsciously showing it through his/her excitement for the team's next season. Additionally, the fan is doing this with the intention of appreciating the football club for bringing needed joy by winning games and playing attractive football throughout the year in a time when he/she was going through a difficult year, mentally. This is the beauty of attractive football at times, often played by Arsenal. It has the power to lift fans' spirits even and ignite much needed joy in their lives.

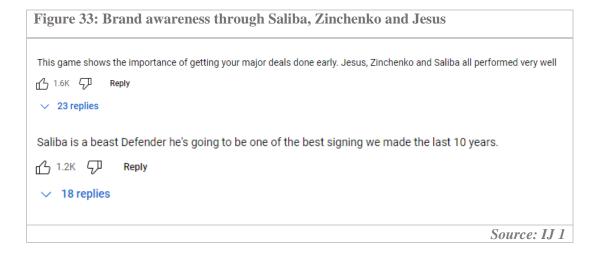
5.3.Brand awareness

Within the theme of brand awareness, a dimension of Aaker (1991) brand equity concept, awareness of the Arsenal brand is discussed under the following sub-themes:

1) Punditry texts; and 2) Rival commendation texts.

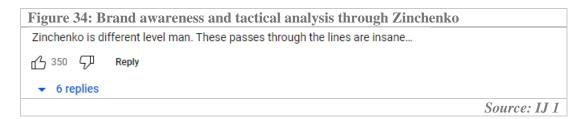
5.3.1. Punditry texts

These are texts from fans who have adopted the roles of football pundits when engaging with the Arsenal brand. Football pundits are specialists who provide analytical insights and opinions about matters football. In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Crystal Palace 2-0, fans within the comment section showcased brand awareness through the players: William Saliba, Oleksandr Zinchenko and Gabriel Jesus (see figure 33).



In this regard, some fans showcased awareness of the Arsenal brand through players such as Gabriel Martinelli and Gabriel Jesus who are both from Brazil. From a brand equity perspective, Arsenal could be developing a fan-base in Brazil because of

Gabriel Martinelli and Gabriel Jesus, who scored goals in Arsenal's 4-2 home win against Leicester City. Indeed there is a comment from a fan who said (in Brazilian Portuguese), 'tô adorando essa fase do Arsenal love Brazil BR 💛 ' which means, 'I'm loving this phase of Arsenal love Brazil BR . Another Brazilian fan said, 'Gabriel' Martinelli is awesome BRBR 💞 💞.' And another said, 'O Brasil, carregando o Arsenal nas costas!!! Gabriel Jesus + Gabriel Martinelli 👋 🥎 BR.' Which means 'Brazil is carrying Arsenal on its back!!! Gabriel Jesus + Gabriel Martinelli e BR.' With regard to match highlights where Arsenal defeated Fulham 2-1 at home, there was support for Odegaard who had an excellent on-field performance from a fan. The fan said, 'This match showed our team mentality led by Odegaard, last season we would have lost such matches, We still have lots of matches to play but the Arteta project is coming to fruition. Let's go. COYG.' From a brand equity perspective, this is brand awareness for the Arsenal brand through the player Martin Odegaard. Something to note here is the comparison of the Arsenal team's current and previous season. This can be seen through this part of the comment: 'last season we would have lost such matches.' With regard to brand comparison, this suggests that this football fan doesn't necessarily compare a football club brand with another, the fan compares the current on field performance of the football club brand with the previous season's on field performance. Moreover, this comment also depicts brand awareness through 'Arteta's project.' Mikel Arteta, Arsenal's football manager has been building a budding team of young players who are performing well for Arsenal. In a game where Arsenal defeated Everton 4-0, a fan showcased brand awareness through the player Oleksandr Zinchenko as depicted in figure 34. Here, the fan analyses the player's passes through Everton's defensive lines and thus calls them *'insane...,'* which is an informal way of noting that the passes were excellent.



In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Brentford 3-0 away from home, there were examples of brand awareness through Fabio Vieira, Arsenal's Portuguese

midfielder. One fan said, 'Fabio Vieira played like he's been here all his life. Shows you how good a player he is. COYG . Another fan said, 'Fabio Viera scores an absolute banger for his first goal and the commentator couldn't be less enthusiastic if he tried!! MAKE AN EFFORT!!!' Even though the fan is quite disgruntled at the commentator's reaction to Fabio Vieira's goal, his/her comments display a form of brand awareness through Fabio Viera. It is worth noting that the word 'banger' is slang for a thunderous goal from a long distance. Further down the comment section of the same game where Arsenal defeated Brentford 3-0 away from home, there was brand awareness through the player Granit Xhaka, Arsenal's former captain. This is a story of redemption because, he was once an extremely unpopular figure at Arsenal due to negative on-field performances, frequent yellow cards, and one too many red cards. In a game against Crystal Palace in 2019, when being substituted, he threw the captain's arm band on the ground as fans booed him. Additionally, he almost became the scapegoat for Arsenal's overall poor performance for the season. All this led to a very sour relationship with Arsenal fans. In fact, it seemed like this relationship had come to a woeful end. Such is the emotional drama within football fan communities. As an Arsenal fan who sympathised with Granit Xhaka at the time, I wouldn't blame him if he wanted to leave a relationship that had become toxic not just to himself but to his family. In some media interviews, Granit Xhaka revealed that he even wanted to leave the club and that the relationship between him and Arsenal fans was over. From a brand equity perspective, Granit Xhaka who is part of Arsenal's brand instigated negative brand awareness at the time. However, before Arsenal's EPL season 2022/23 commenced, Granit Xhaka was convinced to stay at the club by Arsenal's current manager Mikel Arteta. Soon after, his performances improved massively. In this game (Brentford vs Arsenal 3-0), there is praise for Granit Xhaka from the comment section:

Comment

Fan 1: Arteta transformed Xhaka. What a player, always was a fan even when Arsenal fans were hating on him. He might not be the fastest but the way he reads the game is top notch.

Reply

Fan 2: The past is the past... Xhaka has changed...

Source: IJ 1

Support for Granit Xhaka continued where another fan said, 'Saliba, Jesus, Fabio Vieira . But special shoutout to Xhaka who has been incredible this season and once again with a top performance on Sunday. Great win this and now onto the Scums after the break. COYG!!!' [For this fan, the 'Scums' are Tottenham Hotspurs, Arsenal's historical bitter rivals who are also based in North London.] Granit Xhaka's redemption story is indeed a story of faith, pain and forgiveness that arguably goes beyond the realm of negative to positive brand awareness. Nevertheless, this shows that, if Arsenal's brand awareness was damaged due to Granit Xhaka (a part of the Arsenal brand) having a sour relationship with fans, Arsenal's brand awareness can be restored or even redeemed by positive on-field performances from the same player. This is exemplified by the comment illustrated in figure 35.



In the match highlights, where Arsenal defeated Tottenham Hotspurs 3-1 at home, one fan said, 'The moment I saw Gabriel Jesus tracking back to cover for Zinchenko and winning the ball from Richarlison, I fell in love more with Arsenal ' ' ' From a brand equity perspective this fan expresses brand awareness simply by observing a specific moment where he/she felt the player Gabirel Jesus, who is a striker, went the extra mile on the field to cover his team mate Zinchenko, who was out of position. In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Liverpool 3-1 at home, a fan shared his/her sentiments towards the player Takehiro Tomiyasu, Arsenal's Japanese defender (see figure 36).



In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Leeds 1-0 away from home, one fan said, 'Wow, the way Odegaard passed through the Leeds Players was insane 6.' From a brand equity perspective, the fan is showcasing awareness of the Arsenal brand through the player Martin Odegaard, Arsenal's Norwegian midfielder and team captain. Regarding the same match highlights where Arsenal defeated Leeds 1-0 away from home, one fan said, 'The way Saliba appreciates Gabriel after that mistake is amazing.' It is worth noting that the fan is impressed by the positive interaction between defenders William Saliba and Gabriel Magalhães. This is an example of brand awareness through positive player interactions on the field. In different match highlights where Arsenal defeated Brighton & Hove Albion 4-2 away from home, one fan said, 'Credit to Arteta, Edu and the coaching staff for moulding these young players into a formidable competitive team. This season's performances have restored pride back in the fanbase.' In this regard, Edu is a former Arsenal player who was part of the Invincibles and is now Arsenal's technical director, the person in charge of Arsenal's first team player recruitment. Here, the fan is showcasing positive brand awareness of the Arsenal brand through his/her appreciation of Mikel Arteta, Arsenal's team manager, Edu and the team's coaching staff. For this fan, Mikel Arteta, Edu and the coaching are an integral part of the Arsenal brand.

In the match highlights where Arsenal drew 0-0 vs Newcastle United at home, one fan said, 'One of the most positive things about this game is fans' attitude after the match. Instead of breaking down because of the draw, we keep on encouraging our boys to keep their head high and look forward to the next game, COYG.' This is interesting from a brand equity perspective as it shows brand awareness through post-match fan attitudes in the stadium. This suggests that brand attitudes from fans in the stadium seem to be part of the Arsenal brand. In a way, some Arsenal fans who attend stadium matches have enmeshed themselves into the fabric of the Arsenal brand.

In the match highlights where Arsenal lost 1-0 to Everton away from home, some fans displayed negative brand awareness towards the Arsenal brand. One fan said, 'Today was the first prem (EPL) game in 20 my team didn't have the hunger or desire. It was clear to see Everton had the greater desire for the win. 1st half of the season we took pride fighting for every ball and every chance, that's why we're top. But today, the fight wasn't there at all . Here, the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand in a negative light. He/she is aware of the team, which is part of the Arsenal brand, as a team that

does not have 'hunger or desire' and 'fight' to win matches. In this regard, a fellow fan replied to the aforementioned comment and said, 'OMG SO TRUE. At the5 min mark I was already was telling my wife, why Arsenal are not running, no hunger.' For him, Arsenal lacked the 'hunger' to win matches. In a similar but more hopeful tone, while sharing sentiments on the same game where Arsenal lost 1-0 to Everton away from home, one fan said, 'Could see it from minute 1 that the boys didn't feel it. Shameless display from PL title contenders but we go again next week. COYG!!!.' This shows that despite negative brand awareness towards the Arsenal brand from the fan, by being aware of the team's 'Shameless display,' he/she still recognises them as EPL 'title contenders' and urges the team to keep going ('COYG!!!!').

In a game where Arsenal defeated Fulham 3-0, there was appreciation for Arsenal's technical director Edu, (see figure 37). He ensured that the club signed Leandro Trossard in the January/Winter transfer window. And because the player performed well against Fulham, the fan praises Edu.



In Arsenal's last game of the season, they defeated Wolverhampton 5-0 at home. It was Granit Xhaka's last game after eight years with the football club. One fan said, 'Man I'm going to miss Xhaka so much. His experience, leadership, and tenacity are invaluable. As well as the fact that he is hard as nails and gives us an edge in tough, physical matches. I trust Eduteta know what they're doing though.' Here, this fan is aware of Granit Xhaka as a player who has invaluable 'experience, leadership, and tenacity.' For the fan, Granit Xhaka is a player who has a tough physical quality and is valuable in matches against physically strong opposition. The fan also has a creative way of showing his trust in Mikel Arteta, the team manager, and Edu, the club's technical director. Hence the play on words Edu and Arteta to form 'Eduteta.' In this light, one fan replied, 'Eduteta:) new slang for me to use.'

5.3.2. Rival fan texts

These are texts that showcase brand awareness of the Arsenal brand from fans of different clubs. In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Crystal Palace 2-0 away from home, an Olympique de Marseille fan showed support for William Saliba, Arsenal's French defender. The fan said, 'We had him last year at Olympique de Marseille. Saliba is a SALIBEAST he was the best player of OM (Olympique de Marseille) the whole of last year and played very well with Equipe de France the national team in 2022. Enjoy it Arsenal fans and thank you for the nice relations between Marseille and Arsenal's boards...' William Saliba's move to Arsenal from his loan spell at Olympique de Marseille seems to have drawn attention from this fan. Over the years, Arsenal has been known to recruit a large number of French players. For example, Thierry Henry, Patrick Viera, Emmanuel Petit, Robert Pires etc. Even Arsene Wenger, Arsenal's longest serving manager, hails from Duttlenheim, France. Thus, Arsenal's French connection may have generated a large Arsenal fan base in France. In this light, the fan says 'thank you for the nice relations between Marseille and Arsenal's board.' From a brand equity perspective, this Olympique de Marseille fan is showcasing brand awareness for the Arsenal brand through William Saliba's loan spell at Olympique de Marseille. And during this loan spell, William Saliba earnt the nickname 'Salibeast' because of his excellent defensive performances.

In the comment section of the same match highlights (Arsenal vs Cystal Palace 2-0), a Liverpool fan said, 'As a Liverpool fan, what a fun, exciting team to watch. Love how many young talents will develop there.' This shows that Arsenal brand did not only generate attention from an Olympique de Marseille fan, but from a Liverpool fan as well. From a brand equity perspective, the fan is aware of the Arsenal's brand as a team that is 'fun' and 'exciting to watch'. Additionally, in the match highlights of the same game (Arsenal vs Cystal Palace 2-0), a Barcelona fan said, 'Barca fan here, love to see Arsenal doing great again. Hope they can keep this form against big teams. Best of luck for the season.' Barcelona and Arsenal are known for playing the famous 'tiki taka' brand of football over the years. This is a football philosophy influenced by Barcelona's former football player and coach Johan Cruyff. It entails playing positive forward-thinking football with simple yet creative passing patterns, which according to football fans, creates entertaining and fun football to watch. This football philosophy seems to have created a connection between Arsenal and Barcelona fans.

Perhaps that is why the Barcelona fan says he/she 'loves to see Arsenal doing great again.' Additionally, this means that Arsenal was once a highly successful team. In this light, in the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Leicester City 4-2 at home, a Manchester United fan said, 'I'm a Man United fan, but seeing Arsenal slowly coming back has put a smile on my face, hope they have a good season. Martinelli and Jesus are insane.' Here, the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand as a team that is 'slowly coming back' to winning ways.

In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Bournemouth 3-0 away from home, a non-Arsenal fan said, 'Not an Arsenal fan, but Gabriel Jesus is looking unbelievable. Happy for him. 'Another non-Arsenal fan said, 'I'm a Liverpool fan and it makes me really happy to see Arsenal prosper. Always been my second or third favourite team in the league. From a brand equity perspective, this fan is aware of the Arsenal brand as his/her 'second' or 'third favourite team' in the EPL. In the same match highlights (Arsenal vs Leicester City 4-2), an Ajax Amsterdam fan said, 'As an Ajax fan myself I really enjoy seeing this Arsenal play. This is the Arsenal we've been waiting for so long. Hope they can keep this up and maybe win the title!' Like Barcelona, Ajax Amsterdam, a football club from Holland, play a similar brand of football to Arsenal, the tiki-taka style of football. It is also worth noting that Johan Cruyff, an influential figure of the tiki-taka style of football, coached and played for both Barcelona and Ajax Amsterdam. In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Fulham 2-1 at home, a Manchester United fan said, 'As a United fan I've been very impressed with Arsenal so far. United need lots of work still but I'm hoping both clubs would be challenging for the title again in the near future.' And a Chelsea fan said, 'As a Chelsea fan for those who missed this incredible match, good turn back for Arsenal, what a win for the neighbours. This is brand awareness from rival fans who support other English clubs. For the Manchester United fan, he/she is aware of the Arsenal brand as a team that he/she is 'very impressed with' and for the Chelsea fan, he/she is aware of the Arsenal brand as 'neighbours,' or in football, a local rival club, which is based in the same city.

In a game where Arsenal defeated Wolverhampton Wanderers 2-0 away from home, there was a conversation that brewed between some non-Arsenal fans:

Comment

Non-fan 1: Not even an Arsenal fan and I love watching the highlights, great football

Replies

Non-fan 2: Respect bro 👍 but they do play the fanciest football in the league

Non-fan 3: even I am not an arsenal fan but I am proud of what they are doing this season

Non-fan 5: I'm also not really a fan of them but I still do like them and I actually do hope they win the league this year.

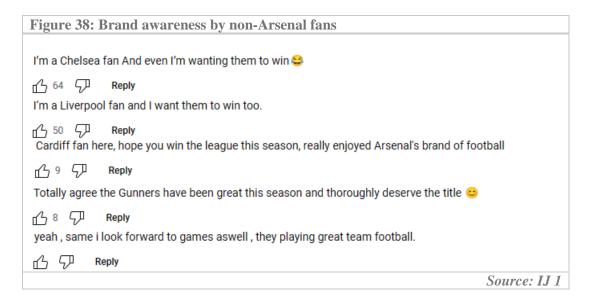
Non-fan 4: Same, I am also enjoying their football even though I am not a fan

Source: IJ 1

All four non-Arsenal fans are showcasing positive brand loyalty towards the Arsenal brand through their appreciation of Arsenal's style of football. Non-fan 2 is aware of Arsenal's brand of football as the 'fanciest' in the league, meaning it is the most beautiful brand of football to watch in the EPL. In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Aston Villa 4-2 away from home, a few non-Arsenal fans from other clubs showed brand awareness towards the Arsenal brand (see figure 38). This was catalysed by a comment from one non-Arsenal fan who said, 'I'm not an Arsenal supporter, however watching Arsenal this season is so entertaining and enjoyable. I hope the title is yours this season.' Here, the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand as a team that is 'entertaining and enjoyable' to watch. Additionally, the Chelsea fan and Liverpool fan agree and acknowledge their wish for Arsenal to win the EPL. As For the Cardiff City fan, he/she is aware of the Arsenal brand as a team whose 'brand of football' is enjoyable to watch. Additionally, the last fan comment in figure 38 is aware of the Arsenal brand as a club that are 'playing great team football.'

In the match highlights of the game where Arsenal drew 3-3 with Southampton at home, one a Liverpool fan said, 'Liverpool fan here. It's been a real pleasure watching this young squad play their way to a potential title this season. Things are more difficult now with points dropped, but they've shown that they have the mentality and fighting spirit to turn things around, and this mentality is exactly what's needed going into the next big game. It'll take something special to get all three points at the Etihad (a draw is of no use), but nothing is impossible. If Brentford could do it then Arsenal can. I'm rooting for you.' In this regard, Arsenal's next match was against Manchester City away from home or at Manchester City's home ground, the Etihad stadium.

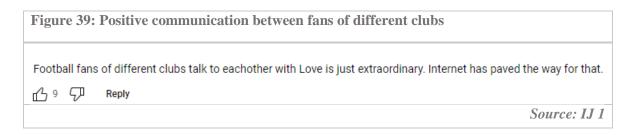
Moreover, it was important for Arsenal as they were in a tight EPL title race with Manchester City towards the end of the season.



Regardless of the outcome of Arsenal's away match to Manchester City, the Liverpool fan is aware of Arsenal as a 'young squad' who have shown strong 'mentality and fighting spirit' and is hoping that Arsenal would win this match. In the build up to this match after Arsenal dropped crucial points in their 3-3 draw to Southampton at home, a fan from Barcelona shares his/her sentiments about Arsenal, 'I'm a Barcelona fan but it hurts seeing Arsenal dropping points in this crucial time, Arteta should do everything to bring back that winning mentality cause Pep I know is going to unleash Haaland and Alvarez on them next week.... I'm rooting for you guys.' Here, the Barcelona fan knows the uphill battle the Arsenal team has at hand because Manchester City have incredibly talented players such as strikers Erling Haaland and Julian Alvarez. Additionally, their manager is Pep Guardiola who is regarded by many as one of the world's best team managers. Based on this, Arsenal indeed lost to Manchester City 4-1 away from home, and as envisioned by the Barcelona fan, it was an uphill battle. However, in the spirit of sportsmanship, there was sympathy from a Manchester City fan who said, 'City supporter here. Arteta did a phenomenal job with this group of boys. As the season draws to a close, it will be followed by a lot of negativities for the team, however let's not forget that no one expected them to be in the top 2 to begin with. With everything he's done this year so excited to see how the next few seasons will play out.' For the fan, he/she is aware of the Arsenal brand as a

team that 'no one expected' to be in the 'top 2 to begin with,' that is in the top two positions of the EPL table.

In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Chelsea 3-1 at home, there was a remark from a Liverpool fan. The fan said, 'Liverpool fan here. I said this before on this channel, Martin Odegaard is my favourite footballer in the EPL outside Liverpool. It's a pleasure to watch him play. Proper captain with a tireless work ethic and always shows up at big moments when it matters. I'm still rooting for you Gunners even though it's become extremely difficult now. Just win all your remaining games and hope for the best. You've played some beautiful football this season. Long may it continue.' Here, the Liverpool fan is aware of Martin Odegaard who is part of the Arsenal brand as: 1) his/her favourite footballer in the EPL besides Liverpool players; 2) a 'proper captain with a tireless work ethic'; and 3) a player who often outstandingly avails himself in 'big moments when it matters.' Apart from that, the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand as a club with a team that has 'played some beautiful football' during the course of the season. The Liverpool fan's comment is followed by a reply from a football fan. The fan's comment is illustrated in figure 39 as an ode to positive communication between fans of different football clubs, which perhaps sums up the beauty of the Internet and Arsenal's official YouTube community. It goes beyond depicting awareness of the Arsenal brand and transitions into showcasing the fan's awareness of his/her online social context within Arsenal's official YouTube community. For him/her at that moment in time, the Arsenal official YouTube community presents an extraordinarily tender social context where fans from different clubs talk to each other with love, which the fan writes in capital 'L' (Love) perhaps to add emphasis on this intricate emotion.



In the match highlights of the same game where Arsenal defeated Chelsea 3-1 at home, a Liverpool fan noted that he/she has been living vicariously through the Arsenal brand. The fan said, 'As a Liverpool fan, I've been living vicariously through Arsenal

for months. Just a shame Ode (Odegaard) couldn't turn up against City. Come on the Gooners!' Here, the Liverpool fan is aware of the Arsenal brand as his/her own football club through vicarious living. He/she has even adopted the well-known Arsenal slogan 'Come On You Gooners!' but has altered it to 'Come On The Gooners.' Through vicarious living the Liverpool fan is aware that Arsenal is not his/her primary club of choice, however by initiating a vicarious life, he/she has adopted Arsenal as his/her secondary club of choice.

In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Newcastle 2-0 away from home, a Chelsea fan said, 'As a Chelsea fan, I'm deeply excited to see my neighbours competing for the title, it's madness when we easily forget that Arsenal has won the invincible title, I appreciate the fight and the energy they put on the title. Hopefully Gunners will manage to grab this one.' Here, the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand as his/her 'neighbour' by noting that he/she is excited that Arsenal is competing for the title. This term 'neighbour' is used because both Arsenal and Chelsea are clubs based in London with Arsenal coming from North London and the Chelsea from West London. Additionally, the fan is also aware of the Arsenal brand as a team that has 'fight' and 'energy.' In the game where Arsenal lost 3-0 to Brighton & Hove Albion at home towards the end of their EPL campaign, a non-Arsenal fan shared a poetic summation of the EPL title race between Arsenal and Manchester City. Figure 40 illustrates this.



Here, the non-Arsenal fan is aware of the Arsenal brand as a team that 'has lived a beautiful dream' during the season 'but finally woke up to the brutal reality' of losing the EPL title race to Manchester City, a team of far superior quality than them. As an Arsenal fan, I concur that indeed Arsenal lived a beautiful dream. It had been many years since the team has actually competed for the EPL title let alone been considered as title contenders. The dream however, came to a pitiful end as the team were humiliatingly crushed by Manchester City 4-1 away from home. The bitter taste of

harsh reality sunk into the hearts of everyone who was a part of Arsenal's EPL journey, especially the fans. In the end, Manchester City were simply superior than Arsenal in every area of the field and resource. Towards the end of the season, the battle between Manchester City vs Arsenal was like watching David vs Goliath, but this time Goliath ruthlessly won the battle. With regard to the highlights on the same match (Arsenal vs Brighton & Hove Albion 0-3), a Liverpool fan said, 'As a Liverpool fan, I have mixed feelings. Watching another year city go through despite the resistance from other teams. Also, proud that my LIV (Liverpool) team gave a fight to city till the last matchday twice and finished 97/99 points without winning. Tells a lot about the mentality. Coming to Arsenal, they played like champions whole season, sad to see them bow out like this. But this will only build the team. It also shows them what exactly is required at the top of the game and in their young careers, they got to learn a lot. 'Here, the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand as: 1) a team with players who have 'young careers'; and 2) a team who 'played like champions' for the entire season. In the match highlights of Arsenal's penultimate game of the season, where they lost 1-0 to Nottingham Forest away, a non-Arsenal fan said, 'Congratulations for City and hard luck to Arsenal for the beautiful season they have made!' Here, the fan is aware of Arsenal as a team that created a 'beautiful season.' In Arsenal's last game of the season, where they defeated Wolverhampton Wanderers 5-0 at home, Yakub Kiwior, Arsenal's Polish defender scored a goal. A non-Arsenal fan from Poland shared his/her remarks. This is illustrated in figure 41. Here, 'PL' is short hand for Poland.



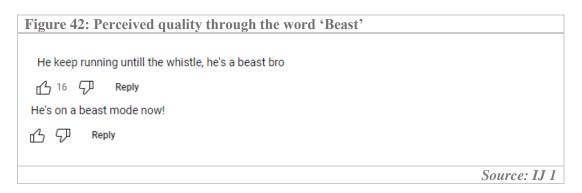
The fan is aware of Arsenal as a team where a player from his country plays. Hence, the use of the adoptive phrase 'our boy Kiwior.' The use of the word 'our' signifies a sense of familial closeness by the Polish fan who is probably not related to Yakub Kiwior. However, because he/she shares a Polish cultural heritage with Yakub Kiwior, he/she perhaps feels a closeness to the player. Yakub Kiwior seems to have enticed awareness of the Arsenal brand from his Polish 'rodacy.'

5.4.Perceived quality

Within the theme of perceived quality, a dimension of Aaker (1991) brand equity concept, perceived quality of the Arsenal brand is discussed under the following subtheme: Player performances, key words and phrases.

5.4.1. Punditry texts, community jargon and symbolic texts

These are texts that showcase fans taking the role of pundits often using community jargon and some symbolic texts. With regard to perceived quality through key words, there is a word that fans used to show that a player has delivered a great performance. This word is 'beast' (see figure 42). In the football world, when a player is said to be a 'beast,' it suggests that the player is of high-quality. In this case, and from a brand equity perspective, this is perceived quality through the word 'beast.' For example, the player being described in figure 42 is Gabriel Martinelli, who is part of Arsenal's brand, and is said to be a 'beast' who is on 'beast mode' due to his hard-work and excellence on the field.



In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Fulham 2-1 at home, there was a comment related to the key word 'mentality,' which suggests that the fan was focusing on the mental aspect of Arsenal's on field performance. Indeed, one Arsenal fan said, 'Big mentality shown from Gabriel to recover from his error and score the winner, captain Ø was sensational too. Big win this!!!!' From a brand equity perspective, this is a form of perceived quality through the key word 'Big mentality' as a quality indicator. Here, the Arsenal brand is being perceived as having a strong mentality in terms of its team's on-field performance, which is a sign of a good quality team. In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Aston Villa 2-1, a fan said, 'crazy when we recall where we were when Arsene left. Emery, Ljungberg and the first two seasons of Arteta. Now it is totally a different team. No more soft boys, no more crying for referee,

stronger set piece defence, more organised, more energy from each player through the whole game, old players out, young players developed from previous seasons flourish now, smart transfer signing...and more importantly...the fans are back. No toxic atmosphere at all.' From a brand equity perspective, this is perceived quality through a number of aspects. The fan is perceiving the improved quality of the Arsenal brand in light of the following statements: '...no more soft boys, no more crying for referees' decisions, stronger set piece defending, better organisation, more energy, smart player transfers, non-toxic stadium atmosphere...' For the fan, the aforementioned can be seen as indicators of quality improvement for the Arsenal brand. In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Tottenham Hotspurs 3-1 at home, one fan said, 'Xhaka and Partey in the mid-field are irreplaceable right now!' From a brand equity perspective, this is a form of perceived quality through the word 'irreplaceable.' Here, the fan perceives Arsenal's midfield duo of Granit Xhaka and Thomas Partey as irreplaceable, which exemplifies that for the fan, Arsenal have two high quality players in Granit Xhaka and Thomas Partey. Furthermore, under the same match highlights, there is a fan praising both Xhaka and Partey. The fan says, 'Partey and Xhaka, best midfielders and Gabby Jesus the man of the hour, and to all players congrats on the wins. LET'S KEEP IT UP. 'Here, the use of the word 'best' to describe Granit Xhaka's and Thomas Partey's midfield qualities shows that the fan holds their partnership which is part of the Arsenal brand at a high standard.

In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Liverpool 3-1 at home, one fan was impressed by Arsenal's Japanese defender Takehiro Tomiyasu. The fan said, 'Tomiyasu is the best DF (Defender) in the Premier league as well as the best player in Asia.' The use of the word 'best' is an indicator that the fan perceives Arsenal's team, which is part of the Arsenal brand, as having a top-quality defender, thus being the 'best' quality defender in Asia. In the same vein, as depicted in figure 43, another fan said, 'Tomiyasu keeping Salah in his pocket the whole match!! Hell of a performance, that definitely made the difference JP.' The use of the word 'pocket' here means that Tomiyasu made sure Salah did not pose a threat to Arsenal's defence. In this case, 'Tomiyasu keeping Salah in his pocket the whole match!!!...' is a football fan colloquialism. This is echoed by another fan who said, 'This season is my best season as an Arsenal fan, we play with a lot of confidence and the fighting spirit to

come back in games is amazing. Tomiyasu, and Ben played really well today. I was looking for Salah the whole match not until I saw him in Tomiyasu's pocket. COYG.'

Figure 43: Perceived quality through the football colloquialism 'pocket'

Tomiyasu keeping Salah in his pocket the whole match!! Hell of a performance, that definitely made the difference ♥ JP

1.1K □ Reply

▼ 9 replies

Source: YouTube/Arsenal (2022)

In the comment section of the same match highlights (Arsenal vs Liverpool 3-1), support for Takehiro Tomiyasu continued in quite a unique way whereby comments and replies were related to what can be known as the 'Swiss knife analogy':

Comment:

Fan 1: What a show of character and grit from the team. I want to appreciate a player who has impressed immensely, Takehiro Tomiyasu, elite, elite performance from him, the guy is just elite, elite mentality, Arsenal's very own Swiss knife. This is a team we can all be proud of. COYG!

Replies:

Fan 2: Swiss knife?? More like a Japanese katana.

Fan 3: I think the point is Tomi has become a multitool for Arteta/Arsenal, put him lb, put him rb, and even put him cb or dm, he can do the job.

Fan 4: Thank you, I was just bout typing this to explain the Swiss knife analogy, dude can be used in several positions.

Source: IJ 1

For context, with regard to what Fan 3 said, in football LB means Left Back, a defender who plays on the left side of the field, close to the goal keeper. RB means Right Back, a defender who plays on the right side of the field, close to the goal keeper. CB means Centre Back, a defender who plays in the central position of the field close to the goal keeper. DM means Defensive Midfielder, a midfielder who plays at the central position of the field, close to the defenders. From a brand equity perspective the fans are expressing perceived quality through a unique analogy, the 'Swiss knife analogy,' which suggests that Takehiro Tomiyasu who is part of Arsenal's brand, is a top-quality defender due to his versatility for the team.

In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Leeds United 1-0 away from home, there was a positive perceived quality comment that led to reactions that were not related to perceived quality. For further context, towards the end of the game, Gabriel

Magalhães, Arsenal's Brazilian defender received a red card for foul play towards Leeds United striker Patrick Bamford, but it was reversed as the referee realised Gabriel Magalhães was innocent after further scrutiny. However, the player still had an altercation with Patrick Bamford and words were exchanged. This annoyed some Arsenal fans who were not happy about this aspect of Gabriel Magalhães' performance during the game. However, one fan had a positive comment pertaining to this:

Comment

Fan 1: The fact that Gabriel was absolutely world class yesterday isn't spoken about enough.

Replies

Fan 2: Thank you for being positive minded. I was giving up on the fan base.

Fan 3: 100% agree. I think the situation at the end is a big reason why he didn't get as much credit as he should, for the performance (recency bias) Gabriel, Ramsdale and Xhaka were our best players on the day.

Fan 4 (to Fan 2): Because he's inconsistent do you watch football??

Fan 5 (to Fan 4): He always makes vital contributions as well like how he blocked that goal-bound shot. Do you watch football?

Source: IJ 1

From a brand equity perspective, Fan 1 is showcasing positive perceived quality towards Gabriel Magalhães, who is part of Arsenal's brand, using the key words 'world class' which in football means a player, team and/or performance of top quality. However, the replies garnered a small quarrel amongst fellow fans on whether Gabriel Magalhães is world class. The positive thing is that, in that scenario, more Arsenal fans defended Fan 1's positive perceived quality sentiment suggesting that Gabriel Magalhães is indeed a top-quality defender.

In the match highlights where Arsenal drew with Southampton 1-1 away from home, despite the underwhelming result, there was a positive atmosphere in the community. One fan said, 'the fact that we as a team are disappointed with a draw, shows how far we've come this year. Still the rest of the season to come lads coyg in league football, a draw is not inherently a bad result, especially if it's away from a team's home stadium. However, if a team is accustomed to winning, then a draw is disappointing because it is a slight downgrade from the frequent winning spree that the team has previously experienced. This is the case here. The fan perceives the Arsenal brand as having a top-quality team, a team that is often winning games. Additionally, the disappointment in the draw is supported by another fan's sentiments

within the reply section of the comment. The fan says, 'Bruh I was disappointed with a loss to Manu (Manchester United) and this feels like a loss fr. Standards are high.' Here, the fan is perceiving the Arsenal brand as a team that has achieved high standards by frequently winning games, so much so, that when the team draws a game, it feels like a loss to the fan. The word 'Bruh' is online slang for 'brother' and 'fr' is online or digital communications short hand for 'for real.' It is often used to convey sincerity and truthfulness of a situation. In the same match highlights (Arsenal vs Southampton 3-3), one fan said, 'Can't believe White playing as Wing Back is just that good, it's like CB and RB is A grade!' This is a form of perceived quality of a player by using the phrase 'A grade.' Here, Ben White, Arsenal's English defender, who is part of Arsenal's brand is being perceived as a player of top quality or 'A Grade.' This term is frequently used in the academic field to indicate that an assignment, exam or project has excellently passed an evaluation. For example, an academic marker/assessor can say, 'This student has submitted an A grade end of semester project' to mean that the student at hand has delivered a project of high quality.

In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Nottingham Forest 5-0 at home, a fan shared mixed sentiments about Gabriel Jesus, Arsenal's Brazilian Striker:

Comment

Fan 1: Gabriel Jesus might not be scoring goals as expected but his fluidity is helping Arsenal score more goals as a team.

Replies

Fan 2: "His fluidity is helping..." helping is an understatement. He made three assists in a game that's outrageous.

Fan 3: He is a second striker I believe, same as Podolski, he operates like a fox in the box.

Fan 4: Guys he is not a proper number 9, He likes to Play false 9.

Fan 5: Exactly that, here in Brazil he always played as a winger.

Source: IJ 1

Podolski is a former Arsenal striker from Germany. He played as a striker who is known as a 'fox in the box.' In football, this is a type of striker [a player whose main role is to score goals for the team by striking the ball towards the opponents goal] who is tricky to defend against because he is always quietly hiding in the opponent's defensive area, waiting to pounce on any opportunity to score a goal. Additionally, a number 9 striker or a false 9, plays the position of a striker whose main role is to score goals whilst assisting other players to score goals. Fan 1 perceives Gabriel Jesus,

Arsenal's Brazilian striker as 'fluid' meaning he moves past opponents with ease, and he seamlessly positions himself in areas that help the team score goals. This can be seen as an aspect of a top-quality player who is part of Arsenal's brand even though the small quarrelsome and analytic discussion about Gabriel Jesus amongst some fans may seem negative. Specifically, there are varying opinions from Fan 3, 4 and 5 with regard to identifying which position suits the player. On the aspect of the same player, one fan said, 'Gabriel Jesus is a slow poison distributor when he gets the ball he can score. 'At first, this may seem like negative perceived quality because, Gabriel Jesus, who is a part of the Arsenal brand is being perceived as a 'slow poison' distributor or passer of the ball. In this sense, the word 'slow poison' carries negative connotations because of its gradual harmful effects. However, in this context the fan is trying to showcase that Gabriel Jesus is actually a top-quality player who is a threat to opponents because like slow poison, he is deceivingly hard to detect and slowly kills the victim. Additionally, he gradually makes key passes to team mates so they can score. In football, such passes are known as assists, when a player passes the ball to a team mate who then scores a goal.

In the same match highlights (Arsenal vs Nottingham Forest 5-0), there was some support for Arsenal's Norwegian team captain, Martin Odegaard in the following conversation:

Comment

Fan 1: Odegaard's close control on the ball is sick 🚱

Replies

Fan 2: U mean ill?

Fan 3: Dare I say Messi-esque

Fan 4: There is a reason he was once dubbed as "Norwegian Messi". Only if he could be that proactive with the ball he will be included as one of the best in his position.

Source: IJ 1

In modern slang lingua, the word 'sick' means fascinating. In this sense, when Fan 1 remarks that Martin Odegaard's close control on the ball is 'sick,' he/she means that Odegaard has fascinating close control. Thus, he/she perceives Martin Odegaard, who is part of Arsenal's brand, as a player of top quality due to his excellent close control of the ball. This remark garners an interesting conversation in its reply section. Fan 2 introduces a new word to the conversation, 'Ill.' In modern slang lingua 'ill' also

means that something is fascinating. However, Fan 3 says that Martin Odegaard's close ball control is 'Messi-esque.' In football, Lionel Messi, from Argentina, is perceived as one of the world's best footballers. Thus the word Messi is used creatively here by Fan 3 to show that he/she perceives Martin Odegaard's close ball control to be of high quality because it is 'Messi-esque.' Fan 4 shares the same perception, however, he/she says that Martin Odegaard who is from Norway, was dubbed as the 'Norwegian Messi.'

In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Brighton & Hove Albion 4-2 away from home, two fans showed support for Martin Odegaard's high quality on-field performance. One fan said, 'Odegaard is showing KDB levels, it's absolutely ridiculous how good this man has been for us this season!' KDB is shorthand for Kevin De Bruyne, Manchester's City's Belgian midfielder who is considered by many fans as one of the best midfielders in the world. Here, the fan perceives Martin Odegaard, who is a part of Arsenal's brand to be a player of high quality by describing his season's on-field performances with the phrase 'KDB levels.' In the reply section to this comment, one fan humorously says, 'no... its KDB showing Odegaard levels'. This is a form of reverse perceived quality to a comment by sharing that Martin Odegaard's on-field performances are even better than Manchester City's Kevin De Bruyne by exchanging the industry (EPL) quality standard (Kevin De Bruyne) for a

creative midfielder with Arsenal's creative midfielder, Martin Odegaard. Thus, to this fan Martin Odegaard is the industry (EPL) quality standard for creative midfielders. In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Manchester United 3-2 at home, one fan said, 'Zinchenko is the key. Absolutely amazing player with one of the best football IQs I have ever seen. Every decision from him is prefect, with great skill and high work rate.' Another fan replied, 'Zinchenko's ball IQ is next level. Guy can fill in as a CM when needed, and looked so natural when doing so. Top, top player.' Here, a key thread is the use of the terms 'football IQ' and 'ball IQ' to discuss a player's football intelligence. This is a footballer's: 1) smart positioning and awareness on the field; 2) ability to make the right key passes at the right time; and 3) the ability to read the opponent's attacking moves, almost like a smart chess player. Thus, for both fans, Oleksandr Zinchenko who is a part of the Arsenal brand, is being perceived as having high quality football intelligence.

In the match highlights where Arsenal drew 1-1 to Brentford at home, one fan said, 'Saka is performing consistently with his fine ball control and dribbling skills. Trossard was impressive and created chances.' Here, the fan perceives Saka, who is a part of the Arsenal brand, to be a top-quality player because of: 1) 'fine' ball control; 2) dribbling skills; and 3) consistent on-field performances. Fine ball control skills and consistent performances can be viewed as indicators of a high-quality brand. In this case, Bukayo Saka, a part of the Arsenal brand. It is worth noting the appreciation of Leandro Trossard, Arsenal's Belgian striker who was recruited by the club in the January player transfer window, which is often in the mid-season of many European football league calendars. He is also seen as a top-quality player, who is a new part of the Arsenal brand. His top-quality indicator here is the goal scoring opportunities he created throughout the game. This is re-iterated by a fan who said, 'Happy for Trossard. Great signing!' Contrary to the above, one fan was disappointed with the same match result, which was Arsenal's 1-1 draw to Brentford at home. The fan said, 'Zinchenko is the main problem behind our recent slump and Martinelli's loss of form. Our left wing is dead! There's no width Zinny doesn't overlap and stretch the opposition's defence to create space for Martinelli to be effective. Against well drilled, defensively organised teams Zinchenko 's inside passes are too predictable and easy to defend against. Martinelli plays best with Tierney who plays to his strengths by overlapping, drawing defenders and creating space. Ben White can sit out the next

games too, the quality of his crossing in recent games has been subpar. Our wingbacks need refreshing Tierney and Tomiyasu offer better defence and fight for the 2nd balls than the current pair. 'Here, the fan perceives the quality of Arsenal's attacking threat on the left side of the field as 'dead,' which is a strong description of a low-quality aspect of the Arsenal brand. Within the fan's sentiments, other indicators of a low-quality aspect of Arsenal's on-field performance are: 1) no width; 2) no overlaps; 3) no stretching of an opposition's defence to create space; 4) predictable passes which are easy to defend against; and 5) subpar quality of crossing the ball.

In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Aston Villa 4-2 away from home, one fan said, 'Saka is world class. He'd walk into any team in the continent. He is so consistent and clear of any 21-year-old out there. He plays the same for club and country. Arsenal is so happy to have him!' For this fan, a key indicator of top quality is 'consistency' and Bukayo Saka's ability to 'walk into any team in the continent' or warrantee a starting position in any team in the continent. He/she expresses this by using the word 'world class.' Thus making 'world class' a key descriptor of a topquality player, in this case, Bukayo Saka, who is part of the Arsenal brand. With regard to this comment, other two top-quality indicators are showcased by a fan who replied, 'And he is very humble and well mannered .' For this fan, humility and good manners are key indicators of a top-quality football player, in this case, Bukayo Saka. Another fan replied, 'honestly, he was the best at the WC (World Cup). Simply because he was fouled so much during France vs England, which did not let him make enough difference. He could only bring 1 penalty. But I liked his performance more than Mbappe and Messi. 'For this fan, a key indicator of a top-quality player is the number of times he/she is fouled, in this case, Bukayo Saka in the Qatar World Cup 2022 semifinal for England vs France. Additionally, for this fan Bukayo Saka is the 'best' because of this. Another aspect to note is the fan's perception of Bukayo Saka being better that Kylian Mbappe and Lionel Messi who are arguably considered as some of the best football players in the world. For him/her, this is another indicator of Bukayo Saka's top-quality on-field performance, which is a part of the Arsenal brand. On the aspect of Bukayo Saka's consistency on the field, one fan replied, 'last three months is (too) small a template to judge. Let's pick consistency for last 1 year or 2 years for both club and country. Rashford is behind him.' In this case, the fan offers a template for consistency when it comes to judging a player's on-field performance. For him/her,

consistency for a period of one or two years plays a role in his/her perceived quality of a player's on-field performance. With regard to the same match highlights, where Arsenal defeated Aston Villa 4-2 away from home, a conversation about Jorginho, Arsenal's Italian midfielder brewed. For context, his excellent long-range effort that ricochet off Aston Villas' goalkeeper for an own goal, gave Arsenal a 3-2 lead towards the end-of the game. The conversation is as follows:

Comment

Fan 1: Everyone appreciating Jorginho's last minute screamer but look at his performance overall. What a baller

Replies:

Fan 2: He is a baller

Fan 3: He is good when we are attacking, but defensively he is trash

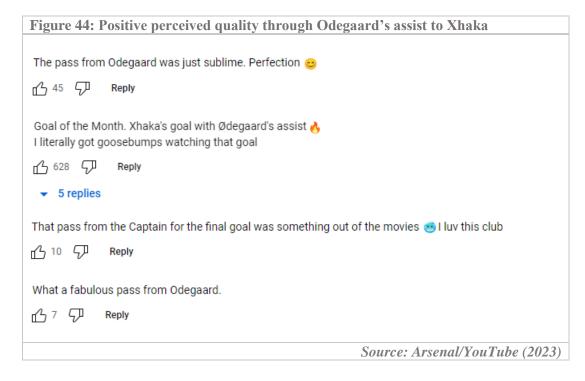
Fan 4: He is not a Dm, more like a regista. More reason why Arsenal should have bought a Dm or try and improvise a player to play the Dm role alongside him. Was Pirlo good defensively!?

Source: IJ 1

For Fan 1 and 2, the term 'baller' is used to describe a player of high quality. In this case, Jorginho. In football, 'baller' is slang for a player of exceptional quality because of his/her excellent vision for passing, confidence, calmness and dribbling ability. For Fan 3, Jorginho is of good quality when the team is attacking, however, when they are defending, he is of bad quality. Hence the use of the strong word 'trash.' However, the fans subjective opinion is not a generalisable indicator of Jorginho's overall quality as a football player. He is still highly ranked as a top-quality football player within the global football community, so much so, that he was selected to play for Italy in the UEFA Euro 2024, Europe's top tier continental football tournament. In this light, Fan 3's comments about Jorginho instigated Fan 4 who defends Jorginho's on-field performance by noting that he is not a DM (Defensive Midfielder) but rather, he is a 'regista.' The term regista is Italian for 'director.' In football, a regista is a deep lying playmaker who vies his/her trade in front of the team's defensive line of players, thus defending is not his/her primary role. Additionally, a regista's role entails receiving the ball from defenders and distributing it to attacking midfielders or strikers in a creative way. His/her role also entails conducting the pace of the game by how quickly or slowly he/she chooses to release the ball once he/she receives it in a deep midfield position. In women's football, Keira Walsh from England, is considered a regista. And in men's football, Andrea Pirlo, a retired player from Italy is also considered a regista.

In a game where Arsenal defeated Leeds United 4-1 at home, Arsenal's captain Martin Odegaard made an excellent assist to Granit Xhaka for the team's fourth goal. There was praise for this passage of play from some fans (see figure 44). In this comment thread, words, phrases and emoticons that are used to indicate the perceived quality of Odegaard's pass are: 1) sublime; 2) perfection; 3) fire emoji; 4) something out of the movies; 5) freezing emoji; and 6) fabulous.

In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Chelsea 3-1 at home, one fan shared his/her sentiments about some of Martin Odegaard's statistics. The fan said, 'Odegaard leading from the front. 14 goals and 7 assists, great achievement.' The fan perceives Odegaard, who is a part of Arsenal's brand as a high-quality player by mentioning his excellent statistics ('14 goals and 7 assists' are a 'great achievement').



In the match highlights where Arsenal lost 3-0 to Brighton & Hove Albion at home, one fan was not impressed by Arsenal's defensive quality. The fan said, 'Shocking defending from a team who was so solid earlier in the season.' Here, the fan negatively perceives the team's defensive quality which is part of the Arsenal brand through the word 'shocking.' In football, this word is often used to describe an event or occurrence that is extremely disappointing during the game.

5.5.Brand associations

Within the theme of brand associations, a dimension of Aaker (1991) brand equity concept, associations of the Arsenal brand are discussed under the following subthemes: 1) Affective analytical texts; 2) Historical texts; and 3) Team qualities and stadium atmosphere.

5.5.1. Affective analytical texts

These are texts that showcase the recognition of fan and team emotions during onfield match performances. In Arsenal's second game of the season where they defeated Leicester City 4-2 at home, William Saliba drew attention from some fans. For context, Arsenal fans in the stadium cheered him on after he unfortunately scored an own goal. This was because he confused which position Aaron Ramsdale, Arsenal's goal keeper was in, and passed the ball back to an empty net leading to an own goal or OG (short hand for Own Goal). In light of this, one fan said, 'I love how the fans cheered and encouraged Saliba after his own goal, making sure his spirit doesn't drop. It shows how united the club and fans are.' Another fan said, 'Was at the game. Proud of how the fans supported Saliba after his mix up with Ramsdale. Cheered every header, tackle and pass he made for the rest of the game. That's what fans do. Respect.' And another said, 'My biggest takeaway from the game is fans clapping, trying to cheer up Saliba after his OG... It's incredible how far we have come together with Mikel at the wheel. One for all, all for one COYG.' Usually, in football, when a player scores an own goal, he/she is not favoured by fans. However, William Saliba was cheered on by Arsenal fans in the stadium. Here, the Arsenal brand seems to be associated with the phrase 'united club and united fans.' Indeed, as depicted, there is a fan who ended his/her comment with 'One for all, all for one,' which can be linked to Alexander Dumas' novel, The Three Musketeers. Here, Arsenal's positive start to the season seemed to have created positive brand energy to the extent that when a player performed poorly, this drew some fans together to cheer him on. Thus, rather than negative on-field performance damaging the Arsenal brand, it seems to be improving the brand by bringing some fans together. However, it is important to remember that this is largely due to consistent positive on-field performance by the team.

With regard to the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Fulham 2-1 at home, there was a fan's brand association related fan comment, that linked certain team values to the Arsenal brand. The fan said, 'I've not seen such zeal, passion and desire in the Arsenal team for so long. Onwards and upwards!' From a brand equity viewpoint, this means that the Arsenal brand is being associated with the following affective team qualities: 1) Zeal; 2) Passion; and 3) Desire.

5.5.2. Historical narrative texts

These are texts that showcase historical story telling by fans. In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Leicester City 4-2, Arsenal's past success, including their unbeaten EPL season in 2003/04 was reminisced by a fan who said, 'Would love to bring back the glory days where everyone would tune in to watch Arsenal v United. Superior football without the revolting price tags and egos.' From a brand equity perspective, this is brand association, whereby the Arsenal brand is being associated with the 'glory days.' This suggests that because Arsenal is experiencing on-field success, they are generating positive brand association from some fans. In this sense, they are able to create fond memories of an extremely successful period in terms of on-field performances and intense club rivalries. In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Aston Villa 2-1 at home, there was a nostalgic comment from a fan. The fan said, 'Almost nostalgic to see Arsenal like this again, last 5 games have been fantastic.' This suggests that Arsenal's on field performance is causing a sentimental longing or wistful affection for a period in the past. This period being Arsenal's successful years, which includes the Invincibles era under Arsene Wenger, Arsenal's longest serving and most successful team manager. In this light, in a game where Arsenal defeated Chelsea 2-1 away from home, one fan said, 'Haven't been this proud since our Invincibles. Thank you to the club Arteta, Edu and the players for this joy . One thing to note here is the mentioning of 'Edu,' Arsenal's former invincible and technical director from Brazil. His close work with Mikel Arteta, Arsenal's team manager has partially led to the recruitment of prolific players who seem to have made Arsenal fans proud.

5.5.3. Experiential and bonding texts

These are texts that showcase: 1) fan experiences, which include stadium atmosphere; and 2) moments of connection between football fans. With regard to the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Fulham 2-1 at home, there was a fan who said, 'The fans in the stadium absolutely carried the team right after the mistake, they had the boys' back, Emirates Stadium was unreal today. 'From a brand equity perspective, the Arsenal brand is being associated with a positive stadium atmosphere, especially when the fan notes that the 'Emirates was unreal.' This is slang for something that is impressive. In relation to this, a fan replied to the stadium atmosphere-related comment and said, 'The vibes coming out of the Emirates this year are all positivity.' In slang, the word 'vibes' is used to describe an emotional atmosphere, thus, in this case the Arsenal brand is being associated with having a stadium that emits a positive emotional atmosphere. In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Everton 4-0, the thread surrounding stadium atmosphere continues through the following comment and replies:

Comment

Fan 1: It was my first time ever at the Emirates tonight, and what a game it was ♥ We were amazing. COYG!

Replies

Fan 2: Been there a couple of times. Awesome atmosphere!

Fan 3: Had mine not too long ago. The atmosphere was electric

Fan 4: Did you know how we are in South America raising money to be there supporting the gunners

Fan 5: Ha ha, I had my first visit to Highbury in 1976 to watch the likes of Liam

Brady and Pat Rice! Still get the same buzz today Welcome to Arsenal ²²

Source: IJ 1

This is a form of brand association for the Arsenal brand whereby, Arsenal is being associated with having a stadium that has an 'electric' (Fan 3) and 'awesome atmosphere' (Fan 2). Fan 5 even offers everyone a short history of his/her stadium experience dating all the way back to the year 1976. Additionally, to describe the stadium atmosphere, he/she uses the word 'buzz' which in slang is used to describe excitement and energy. Thus, this fan is associating the Arsenal brand with having stadiums (Highbury and Emirates) that have excitement and energy. It is worth noting

that Highbury is Arsenal's former stadium, and in the year 2006, Arsenal moved from Highbury to the Emirates stadium.

In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Nottingham Forest 3-2 at home, Reiss Nelson, Arsenal's winger, scored a goal in the closing minutes of the game. One fan said, 'That Nelson goal was something else. The Emirates erupted and millions of Arsenal fans worldwide felt euphoric. There's genuine belief that we can become champions this season. The passion and determination this young team shows every time they step foot onto the pitch shows that. Arteta has united us all. I love this club.' Here, the fan notes that the young Arsenal team has 'passion' and 'determination.' This is a form of brand associations where the fan is linking the Arsenal team, which is part of the Arsenal brand with qualities such as 'passion' and 'determination.' This was inspired by the late goal by Reiss Nelson and the eruption of celebration within the Emirates stadium once the player scored. In the match highlights of Arsenal's last game of the season, where they defeated Wolverhampton Wanderers 5-0, despite losing the EPL title race to Manchester City, one fan said, 'Electric atmosphere, rollercoaster season can't say I haven't enjoyed it, we need a massive summer and back and better next season.' Here, the fan associates Arsenal with a club that has 'electric' stadium atmosphere. In this light, a fan from New Zealand said, 'This was a dream come true for me, travelled from New Zealand and got to watch my first ever Arsenal game. My God was it special, so happy for Xhaka to go like that, felt amazing to sing the chants with so much passion. 'Here, the fan is associating the Arsenal brand with having fans who sing chants with a lot of 'passion.'

5.6. Chapter Summary

This chapter has depicted a thematic and/or theoretical data analysis of findings collected through a netnographic immersion journal within the online football fan community of Arsenal's official YouTube channel. The themes within this chapter were guided by Aaker (1991) brand equity concept, which has the following dimensions: 1) Brand loyalty; 2) Brand awareness; 3) Perceived quality; and 4) Brand associations. Thus, the first theme presented in this chapter is Brand loyalty with its subthemes being: 1) Ritual texts; 2) Conscious brand loyalty texts; and 3) Subconscious brand loyalty texts. The second theme presented is Brand awareness with its subthemes being: 1) Punditry texts; and 2) Rival fan texts. The third theme

presented in this chapter is Perceived quality with its subthemes being: Punditry texts, community jargon, and symbolic texts. Lastly, the fourth theme presented in this chapter is Brand associations with its subthemes being: 1) Affective analytical texts; 2) Historical narrative texts; and 3) Experiential and bonding texts. This chapter then closes with a chapter summary. The next chapter presents data analysis and findings with regard to the online football fan community within AFTV, a Fan TV YouTube channel established by Arsenal football fans.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS II: AFTV

6.1. Introduction

This chapter presents findings from AFTV's netnographic immersion journal (IJ 2), which followed Arsenal's EPL season 2022/23 as illustrated in figure 45. It begins by highlighting who the key members of AFTV are, the Arsenal team, and key words that were often used within the community. Additionally, this chapter provides the themes and sub-themes as per a theoretical and/or thematic data interpretation process based on Aaker (1991) brand equity dimensions. Moreover, the immersion journal (IJ 2) consisted of 13,853 words and 83 screenshots, and the appropriate ethical protocol was followed. In this regard, the identities of community members who shared their comments were anonymised. The following themes (and their sub-themes) as per Aaker (1991) brand equity concept are depicted in this chapter: 1) Brand loyalty; 2) Brand awareness; 3) Perceived quality and; 4) Brand associations. Lastly, a summary is presented at the end of this chapter.



6.1.1. AFTV key members, the Arsenal team and key words

The netnographic immersion journal for AFTV focused on the YouTube channel's most consumed series of content, which are post-match interviews of some Arsenal fans and well-known members of the AFTV community such as: Robbie Lyle also known as 'Don Robbie', Lee Judges, Helen, Turkish, Belgium, Julian, Ty, Kelechi and Jason. The post-match interviews are geared towards simply showcasing how

these fans felt about Arsenal matches. Additionally, the post-match interviews are a platform for these fans to share their honest opinion about the club they love and have been loyal to for many years. Some of the thumbnails of their post-match interviews as depicted on YouTube are illustrated in figure 46. The first one is Helen's, and the thumbnail's red and white coloured theme is meant to represent the colours of Arsenal's home kit, which often signify that the team played the match at their home stadium. The second one is Robbie's, and the thumbnail's largely black colour scheme is meant to represent Arsenal's black, grey and gold away kit, which is often worn during matches that are away from their home stadium (opponent's stadium). The third one is Lee Judges' and the thumbnail's pink, navy and light blue coloured theme are meant to represent Arsenal's third kit which is largely worn in case their second kit colours clash with the opponent's first team colours during matches away from home.



At a glance, some of the well-known members of the AFTV community who often participate in post-match interviews are depicted in figure 48. Each of these key members and/or well-known members of the community have their own personal character traits, which are resonant with the members of the community. Over the years, they have become a staple force within the community and fans are eager to hear their match opinions after every Arsenal game. Furthermore, they have become

influential figures within the AFTV community and are often surrounded by Arsenal fans during their post-match interviews. In Arsenal's EPL season 2022/23, the players depicted in figure 47 played for the Arsenal team. For ease of reference, they are often mentioned by football fans within the AFTV community comment section. It is worth noting or re-iterating that the players Leandro Trossard, Jakub Kiwior and Jorge Luiz Frello Filho Cavaliere OMRI (Order of Merit of the Italian Republic), also known as Jorginho were recruited in the middle of the season (January/Winter transfer window), hence, they are missing from the first team squad's photograph.

Figure 47: Arsenal's first team squad, 2022/23



Front Row: Oleksandr Zinchenko, Ben White, Bukayo Saka, Martin Odegaard (team captain), Mikel Arteta (team manager), Granit Xhaka, Gabriel Jesus, Kieran Tierney and Thomas Partey

Middle Row: Fabio Vieira, Gabriel Martinelli, Takehiro Tomiyasu, Gabriel Magalhaes, William Saliba, Rob Holding, Mohamed Elneny, Emile Smith Rowe and Eddie Nketiah Back Row: Marquinhos, Albert Sambi Lokonga, Karl Hein, Aaron Ramsdale, Matt Turner, Reiss Nelson and Cedric Soares

Source: Arsenal (2022)

In football and AFTV's community some of the key words used are:

Home: The Emirates Stadium, Arsenal's home stadium

Away: The opponents' stadium

Gunners/Gooners: Nicknames for Arsenal and their fans

COYG: Come on You Gunners/Gooners, a supportive slogan for Arsenal

Starboy: Arsenal winger Bukayo Saka's nickname

Invincibles: Arsenal's unbeaten team for the EPL season 2003/04

Figure 48: AFTV key member profiles



Helen

Helen often has a calm demeanour even after the team's negative on-field performances. Additionally, she is known to give well-respected and level headed opinions about Arsenal's matches.



Robbie aka Don Robbie

Also known as Don Robbie, he is the founder of AFTV and is a highly respected figure of the AFTV community. He is known for his Jamaican heritage and love for Arsenal, the club he has supported almost all his life.



Lee Judges

Just like Robbie and Helen, Lee is another key figure within the AFTV community and has been part of it for several years. He is known for his passionate match opinions, grounded 'man of the people' personality and defending Arsenal's name with fierce loyalty.



Kelechi

Kelechi has been part of AFTV for many years and is largely known for his vibrant energy, passion, positivity and deep Nigerian heritage. Additionally, he often plays afro-pop music before his post-match interviews, and the fans around him, including Cecile (the interviewer) join him in exuberant joy while dancing.



Tuksish

As a well-known member of the AFTV community, he gets his nickname 'Turkish' because of his Turkish ethnic roots. He is known for his serious demeanour and calmness during his post-match interviews. Additionally, he is a passionate fan who loves Arsenal greatly but is never carried away by extremely positive starts to the season.



Belgium

Like Turkish, Belgium's nickname has a location-based background. Even though he is known for his deeply rooted Ghanian roots, he is nicknamed Belgium because he lived in Belgium for many years before relocating to London. Additionally, he is a key figure within the AFTV community and is known for his honest and passionate opinions about Arsenal's matches.



Julian

Julian has been an Arsenal fan for a large number of years and is a highly respected figure within the AFTV community. He is mostly known for his technical and tactical remarks about Arsenal's matches in his post-match interviews.



Jason

Jason, a well-known figure within the AFTV community, is known for his calm, sensible and in-depth opinions about Arsenal's games in his postmatch interviews. Additionally, he often reaches out to fans in the comment sections to ask for their opinions about the team's games.





Ту

Ty is a key figure within the AFTV community and has been part of it for a large number of years. Before his post match interviews, he is known for paying respect to service members of society within organisations such as the National Health Service (NHS), and for his homage to the Black Lives Matter movement.



6.2. Brand loyalty

Under the theme of brand loyalty, a dimension of Aaker (1991) brand equity concept, loyalty towards the Arsenal brand is presented under the following sub-themes: 1) Conscious brand loyalty texts; 2) Subconscious brand loyalty texts; and 3) Brand influencer texts.

6.2.1. Conscious brand loyalty texts

As noted in the previous chapter, conscious brand loyalty occurs when a fan knowingly showcases his/her loyalty to a football club brand. Specifically, the fan means and wants to show that he/she is a loyal supporter of a football club. In this regard, one football fan consciously confessed his/her long-time support for Arsenal over the years. In Julian's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Liverpool 3-2 at home, one fan was adamant about supporting the team. The fan said, 'If we lose Arteta to City, they will spoil him with money and players that he won't be caught by any other team. Arteta is special and we need to support the team even if we're sinking.' Here, the fan notes that if Arsenal allow Mikel Arteta to leave the club and accept a team manager's position at Manchester City, a club with a large recruitment budget, he will succeed and no other club in the EPL will be able to match him in terms of his team's on-field performances. Additionally, the fan adds that Arteta is an excellent manager and in showcasing conscious loyalty to the Arsenal fans, he/she notes that the fans 'need to support the team' even if they are delivering substandard on-field performances. In Kelechi's post-match interview where Arsenal lost 3-1 to Manchester City at home, he urged the fans to stop having a 'doom and gloom' attitude and to keep supporting the team despite the team's heavy defeat at home. In this regard, one fan said, 'This is why I love Kelechi so much. He is absolutely right. This is the time to stick together. People are just moaning Arteta has not done this, has not done that, start him, start her start this.' Here, the fan is consciously showcasing loyalty to the Arsenal brand by re-iterating Kelechi's point, that despite the defeat it is 'time to stick together.' And another fan said, 'Kelechi is right...we as fans need to stand behind the team... We have not come this far to fail. We played well in the first half and we can still win this league. 'Here, the fan consciously displays loyalty to the Arsenal brand by: 1) acknowledging that Kelechi is right in urging fans to 'stand behind the team' despite the heavy home defeat; and 2) noting that the team can 'still win' the EPL title. Another fan said, 'Kelechi is so right. Every team goes through a dip in form during the season. We just need to get out of it quick and start a run of wins. The league is definitely not over yet.' Here, the fan subconsciously showcases his/her loyalty to the Arsenal brand by noting that 'the EPL title race is not over, thus, there is still time for the team to improve their on-field performances.

In Charlene's interview (a newer member of the regular AFTV post-match interviews) where Arsenal drew 1-1 to Brentford at home, one fan said, 'Let's keep going and support our team. We are The Arsenal. COYG. Points shared but better results next game.' Despite the result, the fan is urging fellow Arsenal supporters to keep supporting the team and exclaims, 'We are The Arsenal COYG.' In this light, one fan says, 'I am still believing in this team and we can still win the EPL even City aren't at their best, mark my words the best City can get tomorrow is a draw.' At this point of the season, Manchester City, Arsenal's rivals were to face Aston Villa in their next game. With regard to brand loyalty, the fan remains loyal to the Arsenal brand despite the draw against Brentford and expresses this by noting that he/she is 'still believing in the team' and adding that the team 'can still win the EPL.'

In Robbie's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Fulham 3-0, a Turkish fan said, 'I'm Turkish guy living in Germany, I love Arsenal since 2002, Pires, Ljungberg, Henry, I love the club thank you for this fan base. 'This is a form of conscious brand loyalty where the fan intentionally showcases that he/she has been loyal to the Arsenal brand since 2002 and even mentions a few prolific players from that era: Robert Pires, Freddie Ljungberg and Thierry Henry. Additionally, the fan loves Arsenal and is thankful for the AFTV fanbase, yet, Arsenal and AFTV are two independent entities. In Helen's post-match interview where Arsenal drew 2-2 with Liverpool away from home, one fan said, 'The pre-assist for Jesus's goal came from Xhaka. That was a welltimed pass. I wouldn't blame him for the result. This is good learning for our team. I'm confident we can win the league. We have come back stronger after every setback. Forever Arsenal . In football, a draw is often regarded as a negative result especially if a team had the lead. In this case, the Arsenal team was winning the game 2-0 and then conceded two goals from Liverpool to draw the game 2-2. It is expected that fans would be disappointed, however, from the fan's comment, it seems like he/she wasn't and goes further to consciously showcase his/her loyalty to the Arsenal brand by finishing the comment with 'Forever Arsenal.'

6.2.2. Subconscious brand loyalty texts

As noted in the previous chapter, subconscious brand loyalty occurs when a fan unknowingly showcases his/her loyalty to a football club brand. Specifically, the fan doesn't mean to show that he/she is a loyal supporter of a football club, and does so un-intentionally. In the match where Arsenal defeated Crystal Palace 2-0, Lee Judges was interviewed after the game. Within the comment section of his interview, one fan said, 'After so many dropped points against lesser teams in season openers, and with all the incredible positive vibe coming from the preseason, I was cringing at the thought of "what if it is another disappointing start...." but the joy and relief this comprehensive victory against a quality side brings to my heart is incredible. Gooners!' From a brand equity perspective, the fan subconsciously showcases his loyalty whereby, he/she is not intentionally showing loyalty to the Arsenal brand, but is subconsciously doing so by noting that he/she has been continuously observing the team's first games of the season ('season openers') for some years.

In the game where Arsenal defeated Leicester City 4-2 at home, Lee Judges was interviewed after the match. Within the comment section a fan said, 'The difference between this and last season is Saka didn't play his best these two games and we still won easily.' While the fan does not showcase subconscious loyalty to the Arsenal brand, his/her comment generated replies from fans who did. One fan replied, 'It's only been two games plus Saka is the best ever young talent coming through to Arsenal.' Here, the fan subconsciously showcases that he/she has loyalty to the Arsenal brand by following Bukayo Saka's journey as an academy player to the first team. Another fan replied to this by asking, 'Fabregas?' and another agreed to this reply by saying, 'agree, Fabregas was way better. This isn't a dig at Saka, it's just that Fabregas was UNBELIEVABLE.' For both these fans, Francesc Fabregas who joined Arsenal in 2003 at the age of 16, is the best young talent to join Arsenal's first team with the latter saying that Francesc Fabregas was 'UNBELIEVABLE.' Here, both fans are displaying subconscious loyalty to the Arsenal brand by noting that they followed Francesc Fabregas' Arsenal career from 2003 to when he left the club in 2011. As an Arsenal fan myself, I can fully understand this Bukayo Saka vs Francesc Fabregas debate. For me, both arguments are incredibly valid and also showcase a difference between older and newer Arsenal fans. Older Arsenal fans in this case such as myself would agree that Francesc Fabregas was one of Arsenal's best young talents especially

after adorning the captain's armband at the young age 21. He was an inspiration for me growing up. In this light, for newer Arsenal fans, Bukayo Saka is what Francesc Fabregas was for me and fans who watched Francesc Fabregas in their tender teenage years. Indeed, there is nothing new under the sun and history is simply repeating itself. Furthermore, for even newer Arsenal fans, Ethan Nwaneri who made his EPL debut at the tender age of 15 in Arsenal's season 2023/24 EPL campaign, will be what Francesc Fabregas was for me and what Bukayo Saka is for newer Arsenal fans. As this beautiful cycle unravels, as both an Arsenal fan and researcher it's truly fascinating to observe. It is worth noting that even as I display my intimate autonetnographic interjections, I too am displaying subconscious brand loyalty to Arsenal, the club I pledge my allegiance to. In the same post-match interview for the game where Arsenal defeated Leicester City 4-2 at home one fan said, 'Gabriel Jesus is our new Sanchez!! Although we need to keep the ball better and be composed in goal and at the back. Great game overall!' Alexis Sanchez played for Arsenal from the year 2014 to 2018. Here, the fan subconsciously shows that he/she has been loyal to the Arsenal brand for a number of years including 2014 to 2018 when Alexis Sanchez played for Arsenal.

In Robbie's post-match interview for the game where Arsenal defeated Brentford 3-0 away from home, he dedicated the victory to the late Queen Elizabeth II. In disagreement to this, one fan opted to remind his/her fellow fans about Thierry Henry, who is considered Arsenal's greatest player (see figure 48). Here the fan does not necessarily want to showcase his/her loyalty to the Arsenal brand, however he/she is doing so subconsciously by recognising one of Arsenal's former players, Thierry Henry, who played for Arsenal from 1999-2007 and in 2012.



In Julian's pre-match interview where Arsenal defeated Liverpool 3-2 at home, one fan remembers Julian's support towards Mikel Arteta in his early tenure as the team manager, when the team's on-field performances were extremely negative. The fan said, 'I remember when everyone wanted Arteta gone except Julian. He was right all along!' Here, the fan is showcasing subconscious brand loyalty to the Arsenal brand by recalling Julian's support for Mikel Arteta in the EPL season 2019/20. In Robbie's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Leeds United 1-0 away from home, Saka scored the only goal of the game. In this regard, one fan said, 'Saka is maturing into a legend. I love the boy. 'Here, the fan subconsciously showcases his/her loyalty to the Arsenal brand by noting that he/she has been observing Bukayo Saka's maturity as a football player over the years. In the reply section, one fan said, 'That man **' and another, 'What do you mean "the boy"?' Both fans attempt to correct their fellow fan by noting that Bukayo Saka is no longer a boy but a man as they also showcase subconscious loyalty to the Arsenal brand by their observation of Bukayo Saka's football career growth, from his first team debut as a seventeen-year-old to the mature first team player he has become. In the same post-match interview, one fan compared two Arsenal teams (see figure 50). Here, the fan recalls and suggests that Arsenal teams of the past had 'bad luck' with regard to getting positive refereeing decisions. The incident that spurred this comment occurred in the match where Arsenal defender Gabriel Magalhães was judged by the referee to have fouled Leeds United's striker Patrick Bamford but the referee reversed his decision some minutes later. The fan suggests that in the past, the 'usual Arsenal' would have received a penalty against them and a red card for Gabriel Magalhães. Here, the fan is not necessarily attempting to showcase loyalty to the Arsenal brand, but is subconsciously doing so by recalling Arsenal teams of the past based on their 'luck' with regard to refereeing decisions.

Figure 50: Subconscious brand loyalty through comparison of the old and new Arsenal

When Gabriel got red + penalty I thought "this is the usual arsenal". After the ref changed decision: "this is the new arsenal. No bad luck anymore!"

☐ 74 Reply

Source: IJ 2

In Kelechi's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Nottingham Forest 5-0 at home, Kelechi's ritual of often dancing and playing Nigerian afro-pop music before his interview, which leads to fans around him jovially joining him, is largely noticed by some fans. In this regard, one fan said, 'For so many years we've ridden the

rollercoaster with Kelechi and his post-match music. It's incredible, what a gooner. Big up.' Here the fan is not intentionally showcasing his loyalty to the Arsenal brand through the years, but is subconsciously doing so by sharing that he/she has been on a journey following Arsenal with Kelechi through the highs and lows of supporting Arsenal. Additionally, the fan uses the Jamaican patois phrase 'Big up,' to show support for Kelechi. Another fan said Kelechi is 'Consistently playing Nigerian music.' Here, the fan is subconsciously showcasing his/her loyalty to the Arsenal brand by highlighting Kelechi's consistent ritual of always playing Nigerian afro-pop music. Moreover, one fan said, 'I wish there was a Kelechi playlist somewhere.' The latter fan seems to have been connected to Kelechi's music over the years, while being loyal to the Arsenal brand, and is even asking for a music playlist designated to Kelechi. In this light, regarding Kelechi's popularity within the AFTV community, one fan said, 'After the game I always come to watch Kelechi's reactions herein.' Here, the fan subconsciously showcases his/her loyalty to the Arsenal brand by ritually watching Kelechi's post-match interviews on AFTV after every Arsenal game.

In Robbie's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Chelsea 1-0 away from home, one fan said, 'A real team effort, extra proud of Arsenal. We have been showing the backbone it takes to win the league, something we have lacked for over a decade. No egos to be stroked, just a squad of 11 men working as a unit and putting in the extra mileage. 'Here, the fan is not intentionally showcasing that he/she is loyal to the Arsenal brand, however, he/she is subconsciously doing so by noting what the team has 'lacked for over a decade.' Thus, the fan is subconsciously showing that he/she has been loyal to the Arsenal for over ten years and has observed the team's transformation into one that has: 1) real team effort; 2) the backbone or stability it takes to the win the EPL title; 3) humility (no egos); 4) team work; and 5) hard work. In Lee Judges' post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Wolverhampton 1-0 at home, one fan said, 'Arteta finished 8th once on his own. The season in which he finished 8th when he first came was halfway or just over halfway through the season, what do you want him too to do? I think we were 10th when he came as well.' This is subconscious brand loyalty where the fan does not necessarily intend to show his/her loyalty to the Arsenal brand but is subconsciously doing so through his/her recollection of Arsenal's league position when the team manager Mikel Arteta joined the club in 2019. Within the same post-match interview, one fan was opposed to one

of Lee Judges' remarks about Arsenal being the only team in the EPL capable of challenging Manchester City. The fan said, 'Rather than branding us "Arsenal is the only team that is able to challenge City." Let's change the narrative now to "City is having a hard time keeping up with Arsenal." Despite the setbacks of past seasons 15-16, 13-14, 07-08, let's move on and gun for league champions this time around. It is possible!!' Here, the fan is subconsciously showcasing his loyalty to Arsenal by recalling the EPL seasons where the team faced a few 'setbacks.' For the fan, these EPL seasons were: 2007/08, 2015/16 and 2013/14. It is worth noting that the use of the phrase 'gun for league champions...,' if taken out of context carries a negative connotation towards Manchester City players, however, the phrase simply stems from Arsenal's nickname 'The Gunners.'

In Belgium's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Westham 3-1 at home, he mentioned how nice it was to see former Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger back at the stadium to watch the team play. In this regard, one fan said, 'Arsene Wenger is the reason most of us even became Arsenal fans! So happy to see him back in the home he built!' Here, the fan is not necessarily trying to show that he/she is loyal to the Arsenal brand but is subconsciously doing so by mentioning that most Arsenal fans including himself/herself started supporting the Arsenal team because of Arsene Wenger. It is worth noting that Arsene Wenger became the Arsenal manager in 1996 and left the club in 2018. The fan also notes that the Arsenal stadium is the 'home' Arsene Wenger 'built' because he was the team's manager when the stadium's construction began in 2004 and finished in 2006. Additionally, amidst temptations to pursue pastures green at different clubs like Paris Saint Germain (PSG) and Real Madrid in 2006, Arsene Wenger loyally remained at Arsenal and oversaw team activities as the club repaid the financial debt accrued for the construction of the Emirates Stadium (see figure 51).

Figure 51: Arsene Wenger at Emirates Stadium Topping Out Ceremony



Source: Arsenal (2005)

In Robbie's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Fulham 3-0, a fan said, 'What a time to be an Arsenal Fan...We have waited for this moment for so long...Thank you Arteta.' This is a form of subconscious brand loyalty where the fan is not necessarily showcasing that he/she is loyal to the Arsenal brand, but is doing it subconsciously by noting that he/she together with other Arsenal fans, have long waited for the Arsenal team to perform well. Another fan said, 'Bossard is the new Santi Cazorla. Both diminutive, both two-footed, both class.' Here, the fan is showcasing that he/she is loyal to the Arsenal brand by mentioning Arsenal's former player Santi Cazorla while comparing Leandro Trossard to him and his qualities as a football player. It is worth noting the play on the word 'Boss' and the name 'Trossard' to form 'Bossard' so as to indicate the prolificness of Leandro Trossard's on-field performances.

In Aaron Simpson's (an upcoming regular interviewee on AFTV) post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Crystal Palace 4-1 at home, one fan said, 'my whole life I was a laughing stock. But ooh, ooh, ooh to be, ooh to be a, GOONER ♥.' Here, the fan is subconsciously indicating that he/she has been loyal to the Arsenal brand despite continuous negative on-field performances of the past by the team. It is these negative on-field performances that lead the fan to be a 'laughing stock' amongst other fans in a large part of his/her life hence the use of the term, 'my whole life...' Additionally, 'ooh, ooh, ooh to be, ooh to be a GOONER ♥' is a song that many Arsenal fans often sing at matches to show the pride of being an Arsenal fan.

In Lee Judge's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Leeds United 4-1 at home, he remarked that a win at Anfield, Liverpool's home stadium in the next game

would be monumental. In this regard, one fan said, 'Agree with Lee. I think a win at Anfield would be monumental. However winning at Anfield is something that hasn't happened for over 10 years and we haven't even taken a point there since 2016. This isn't just a hurdle for us to overcome, it's a road block.' Here, the fan is subconsciously showcasing loyalty to the Arsenal brand by sharing that he/she has been loyal to the Arsenal brand long enough to remember when they last won at Liverpool's home stadium, which was a number of years ago. Additionally, his/her original intention was simply to showcase how difficult it will be for the Arsenal team to win at Liverpool's stadium in the team's next game.

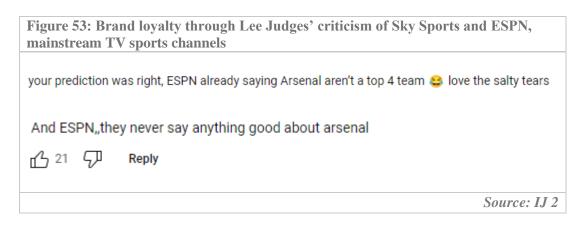
6.2.3. Brand influencer texts

As noted in the previous chapter, these are texts that showcase the influence of AFTV key members on the brand loyalty of Arsenal fans. In the game where Arsenal defeated Crystal Palace 2-0 away from home, Lee Judges was interviewed after the game. In this post-match interview, he shared his sentiments about some pundits at Sky Sports and ESPN (mainstream sports TV channel from the UK and the US respectively), which according to him were showing bias towards Arsenal in their discussions about the club. He shared the narrative that these pundits were waiting for Arsenal to lose their game against Crystal Palace but because Arsenal won, they were left disappointed hence the title of his post-match interview 'TV companies won't be happy, but Arsenal will!' as depicted in figure 52.



From brand equity perspective, Lee Judges is showcasing loyalty to the Arsenal brand by noting that there is bias towards the Arsenal brand among some pundits from Sky Sports and ESPN. However controversial or sensitive this type of loyalty to the Arsenal brand might be, he is willing to show it in a public online community,

something perhaps media personalities within the official Arsenal YouTube channel would avoid because of the club's corporate governance. In a way, Lee Judges is remarking what Arsenal fans want to say or have been feeling for some time but haven't had the platform to project their voices concerning this. Indeed, within the comment section of Lee Judge's post-match interview, one fan said, 'Lee is absolutely right! Sky pundits probably had to throw away their prepared criticism notes for our players.' Additionally, figure 53 illustrates some support for Lee Judges' loyalty to the Arsenal brand.



In Lee Judges' post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Leicester City 4-2 at home, one fan said, 'Really good evaluation of where we're at. Our game management has to improve and I believe it will. Let's take it game by game but right now, we look like we can attack and cause any team problems.' The remark about Lee's really good evaluation shows that Lee's opinion about the Arsenal brand matters.

In Robbie's post-match interview for the game where Arsenal defeated Bournemouth 3-0, one fan recollected the team manager Mikel Arteta's first game in charge. The fan said, 'Bournemouth was Arteta's first game followed by his first game at home to Chelsea. I remember that because I sat next to the man himself Don Robbie in the North Bank.' Here, the fan is showcasing his/her loyalty to the Arsenal brand by recalling this event and a prominent trigger for this memory is the proud moment when he/she sat next to Robbie in the North Bank (the Emirates Stadium's north sitting area) who is also known as 'Don Robbie' within the AFTV community. Culturally, the title 'Don' is rooted from the Latin word 'Dominus,' which means 'Lord' or 'Master.' It has been used in Portuguese, Italian and Spanish as a sign of respect for older gentlemen. Additionally, in the Italian Mafioso context, the title 'Don' denotes a crime

boss. In AFTV's context however, Robbie is known as 'Don Robbie' because he carries a 'boss-like' status as a founding member of the YouTube channel and thus he is viewed as AFTV's boss. In this light, he has embraced this title to the extent of starting his own YouTube channel called 'DR Sports' meaning 'Don Robbie Sports,' which is marketed using boss-like images of himself. In Kelechi's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Tottenham Hotspurs 3-1 at home, one fan shared his/her remarks about Kelechi (figure 54). Here, the fan is showcasing his/her loyalty to the team, which is part of the Arsenal brand regardless of a win or loss. This is spurred by the fan's eagerness to watch Kelechi's post-match interviews because Kelechi 'is always full of joy' and positive energy.



In Charlene's (an upcoming regular interviewee on AFTV) post-match interview, where Arsenal drew 1-1 with Brentford at home, she displayed great belief in the team's ability to get back to winning ways despite their recent substandard results. In this regard one fan said, 'we need all our fans to take a leaf out of Charlene's book. *coyg* ♥. 'This is encouraged brand loyalty to the Arsenal brand through Charlene's loyalty to the team despite the team's disappointing on-field performance. In this light, a fan said, 'Charlene is a fan every team needs. Wha gwan!' Wha gwan is Jamaican patois for 'what's going on' and is at times (as in this case) used to showcase excitement. In Kelechi's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Aston Villa 4-2 away from home, one fan said, 'This is why I like Kelechi; he is always supportive whenever we Lose or Win. This is how every Arsenal Supporter should be.' This is a form of encouraged loyalty to the Arsenal brand by observing Kelechi's loyalty to the team whenever the team wins or loses. Additionally, the fan notes that this is the sort of attitude every Arsenal fan should have. In Kelechi's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Aston Villa 4-2 away from home, one fan agreed with everything Kelechi shared. The fan said, 'I love everything he said... After 5 years of consuming content here this is my favourite interview.' Here, the fan is showing his/her loyalty to the Arsenal brand by noting that he/she has been consuming AFTV's content for five years with Kelechi's interview for the Aston Villa away game being his/her favourite.

In Belgium's post-match interview, where Arsenal dramatically defeated Bournemouth 3-2 at home with a last-minute goal from Arsenal's winger Reiss Nelson, he emphasised that fans should believe that the team can win the EPL title. In this regard, one fan said, 'Big up to Belgium for always believing.' This is encouraged loyalty to the Arsenal brand through Belgium's belief that the team will win the EPL. Notably, the fan uses Jamaican patois to show support for Belgium by saying, 'Big up.' In this sense, some fans have adopted the use of this Jamaican patois phrase to show support for Belgium (see figure 55).



In Helen's post-match interview where Arsenal drew 2-2 with Liverpool away from home, Helen asserted that Granit Xhaka lost his temperament and catalysed the Liverpool fans into creating a loud and uncomfortable atmosphere for Arsenal's team. In this regard, one fan said, 'Absolutely correct Helen... thank you... Xhaka playing his best season for Arsenal... but he lost it when he should have kept his cool and we lost our focus and Liverpool slipped in and changed the momentum... but huge congrats to the players... Let's stay positive.' Here, the fan remains loyal to the Arsenal brand by noting that the fans should 'stay positive' despite the draw against Liverpool in relation to agreeing with Helen's comments about Granit Xhaka. In Kelechi's postmatch interview where Arsenal dramatically drew with Southampton 3-3 at home after

nearly losing the game 3-1 at a crucial point of the season, he was unimpressed by the fans who left the stadium when the team was 3-1 down. This happened towards the end of the game and he deemed it as a sign of disloyalty. In this regard, one fan said, 'I have not seen any fan like Kelechi, he is always positive and there for the team in Good times and bad.' Another fan said, 'I love Kelechi, his energy is amazing regardless of the result. And as he says those fans who left at 3-1 down should be ashamed of themselves.' Both fan comments showcase encouraged loyalty towards the Arsenal brand through Kelechi's loyalty to the Arsenal brand despite the negative on-field result from the team. In Kelechi's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Chelsea 3-1 at home, Kelechi was full of vibrant energy as he often is during his post-match interview. In this regard one fan said, 'Kelechi's fan cam is the one I'm always looking forward to. Big up to him! Gunners 4 life.' Here, the fan shows support for Kelechi by using lingua from Jamaican patois 'Big up.' This is also a form of encouraged loyalty to the Arsenal brand through Kelechi's post-match interview when the fan says, 'Gunners 4 life.'

6.3. Brand awareness

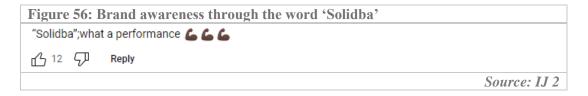
Within the theme of brand awareness, a dimension of Aaker (1991) brand equity concept, awareness of the Arsenal brand is discussed under the following sub-themes:

1) Punditry texts; 2) Brand influencer texts; and 3) Rival fan texts.

6.3.1. Punditry texts

As noted in the previous chapter, these are texts from fans who have adopted the roles of football pundits when engaging with the Arsenal brand. In the match where Arsenal played against Crystal Palace away from home, the team won 2-0. Lee Judges was interviewed after the match. Within the comment section, a fan said, 'I will say it again Saliba is critical and important to everything Arsenal will achieve this season.' It is worth noting that Saliba, Arsenal's young French defender scored a superb goal during the game. For this fan, William Saliba is integral to the Arsenal brand in terms of what the team achieves in their season's on-field performances. Additionally, from a brand equity perspective, the fan is strongly aware of the Arsenal brand through William Saliba, thus for him/her the Arsenal brand is a team that has a player who as the fan puts it, is 'critical and important' to the team's on-field achievements for the season.

Furthermore, with regard to brand awareness through William Saliba, one fan does this through a play on the words 'Solid' and 'Saliba' to form the word 'Solidba.' In this way, he/she wants to show that William Saliba is a strong defender, in that, his defending of the Arsenal goal-line is as 'Solid' as a brick wall making his on-field performances excellent. Figure 56 illustrates this.

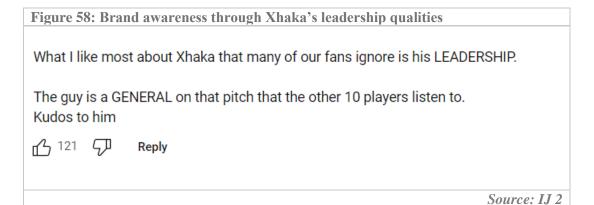


In Robbie's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Bournemouth 3-0 away from home, there was some support for Arsenal's Ukrainian defender Oleksandr Zinchenko (see figure 57). Here, the fans are showcasing awareness of the Arsenal brand through Arsenal's defender Oleksandr Zinchenko. In this regard, the first fan noted that Oleksandr Zinchenko is 'on fire' as an informal or causal way of noting that the player was exceptional during the game. The second fan remarked that the player was 'something else' as an informal way of expressing that Oleksandr Zinchenko's on-field performances were excellent and beyond the norm. The third fan said that the player 'is not talked about enough.' In football, this is a way of noting that a player's superb performances are not noticed and discussed by fans, pundits and an overall football community.



In Turkish's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Everton 4-0, one fan said, 'Still a long way to go but I think we can really push for this title now. COYG.' Here,

the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand as a team that can strongly surge forward in their attempt to win the EPL. Another fan said, 'Four well-worked goals. Martinelli needed a rest and has come back on fire - helped by Trossard whose movement, vision and intelligence helps Martinelli much more than Eddie. Eddie is learning, but a step behind these others. Beautiful yet also ruthless today, with also White, Zinchenko and Gabriel being superb.' Here, the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand as a team that is 'beautiful' yet 'ruthless' in that they played beautiful football and were clinical in taking full advantage of their scoring opportunities. Additionally, he/she is aware of the Arsenal brand through the players: Gabriel Martinelli, Leandro Trossard, Oleksandr Zinchenko, Ben White and Gabriel Jesus. In Kelechi's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Tottenham Hotspurs 3-0 at home in what is known as the North London Derby, a fan shared his/her sentiments about Granit Xhaka, Arsenal's Swiss midfielder (see figure 58). Here, the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand through the player Granit Xhaka and specifically points out that his qualities of 'LEADERSHIP' can be likened to that of a 'GENERAL' in the army. It is worth noting the intricacies of emphasis through uppercase writing of the words 'Leadership' and 'General' by the fan to perhaps show how importance leadership as a quality is to him/her.



In Julian's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Liverpool 3-2 at home, Julian asserted that the team's manager Mikel Arteta had similar managerial qualities to Jurgen Klopp, Liverpool's manager, who is considered a top-level coach in the football world. In this regard, one fan said, 'Arteta is Arteta. He is brilliant and unique, nothing like the others. No other manager could do what he has done with this Arsenal team. Super Mik Arteta indeed.' Here, the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand through

Mikel Arteta and notes that he is 'brilliant and unique.' Additionally, he gives the manager the nickname 'Super Mik.' The fan says, 'indeed' because in Arsenal's home stadium, fans often show support for Mikel Arteta by singing a song titled 'Super Mik.' Regarding the same post-match interview, one fan said, 'Arteta is a masterclass! He is his own, he is the younger modern manager who brings new! When done right with right players he can achieve lots!' Here, the fan is also aware of the Arsenal brand through Mikel Arteta and contends that he is 'a masterclass!' or in this case a highquality manager who is younger than Jurgen Klopp and brings 'new' footballing ideas to the table. All in all, the above fans have shown awareness of the Arsenal brand by strongly distinguishing between Mikel Arteta and Jurgen Klopp in terms of his managerial qualities. Figure 59 illustrates sentiments from fans who did the same, but did not use any managerial qualities. For them, Mikel Arteta is simply Mikel Arteta and 'no one else', he 'will create his own legacy.' The feeling of longing to be unique and like no one else is perhaps being expressed by the fan here. He/she like many other individuals value the beauty of human idiosyncrasies, in that, under a microscopic lens, we are not the same, even if we share various human aspects such as being experts at the one thing. In this sense, Mikel Arteta and Jurgen Klopp on a macroscopic level, are experts in the field of football team management, but under a microscopic lens, which is seemingly adopted by the fan, are two different managers aiming to leave different legacies in the world of football. As an Arsenal fan, I too believe that Mikel Arteta will well and truly 'create his own legacy,' and that he is indeed on the way to becoming a great Arsenal manager. It is also worth noting that as I autonetnographically interject my thoughts as part of this community, I too have adopted the role of pundit like my fellow Arsenal fans, not just in this case, but on separate occasions as well.



While disagreeing with Julian, a key AFTV member who often shares his opinion about the Arsenal brand in post-match interviews could seem detrimental to the Arsenal brand, based on the above, it hasn't. It has shown strong support for the brand through the team's manager Mikel Arteta's unique managerial qualities. In the same post-match interview, some fans displayed their support for Julian. One fan said, 'Julian never fails to deliver just like his beloved Arsenal.' Here the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand through Julian's post-match interview and even likens it to Arsenal's positive on-field performances. Another fan said, 'When Julian speaks everyone listens...massive respect to all Gunners. 'Here the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand through Julian by showing respect for his opinion during post-match interviews. In Robbie's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Chelsea 1-0 away from home, one fan said, 'Arsenal are playing for their fans, their coaching staff, their family and also their self, so proud of the boyz. 'Here the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand as a team that plays for their fans, coaching staff, their family and themselves, which is positive and means that the team is making strong efforts in their on-field performances.

In Robbie's post-match interview where Arsenal lost to Everton 1-0 away from home, one fan said, 'it's not just a defeat but it's the way we lost. The defeat against united (Manchester United) didn't feel that bad cause we played well. Today's game was totally abysmal. The whole team looked like they didn't want to be there.' For this fan, defeat doesn't seem like an integral issue with regard to their perception of Arsenal's quality in the team's on-field performance. Rather, it is the manner in which the team incurred defeat. Thus, the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand as: 1) a team that had an abysmal on-field performance; and 2) a team who were not enthusiastic about playing against Everton. In Belgium's post-match interview, where Arsenal defeated Bournemouth 3-2 in dramatic fashion, with the team coming back from 2-0, one fan said, 'Today, Arsenal taught me to Never Give Up and BELIEVE no matter the odds.' Here, the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand as a team that has taught him/her to 'Never Give Up' and 'Believe' regardless of the odds stacked up against him/her. One thing to note here is the emphasis on the phrase 'Never Give Up' and the word 'Believe' as they are written in capitalise each word and uppercase format. In Robbie's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Fulham 3-0 away from home, one fan said, 'Trossard has been such a quality signing. Our squad looks stronger than ever now

and I am believing that this year is our year.' Here, the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand as a team that signed a quality player in Leandro Trossard and a squad that 'looks stronger than ever.'

In Aaron Simpson's (an upcoming regular interviewee on AFTV) post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Crystal Palace 2-0, one fan said, 'For such a young team, these lads outdo themselves yet again..... COYG'S!!' Here, the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand as 'a young team' who are outdoing themselves, or, displaying an excellent on-field performance. In the same post-match interview, one fan said, 'Saka incredible fire 66 I will also say Martinelli contributed massively.' Here, the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand through the players Bukayo Saka and Gabriel Martinelli. The use of the word 'fire' together with the two flame emojis here are used to describe an excellent on-field performance from Saka. Another fan said, 'Coyg, I thought Xhaka was the best player today. 'Here, the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand through the player Granit Xhaka who he/she notes was the best player of the team during the match. In Lee Judges' post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Leeds United 4-1 at home, one fan said, 'Ben white was brilliant again today, also scored a goal well done Benny boy. 'Here, the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand through the player Ben White whom he notes was 'brilliant' and 'scored a goal.' The fan even gives the player a nickname, 'Benny boy.'

In Lee Judge's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Leeds United 4-1 at home, a Somalian fan said, 'I used to think Manchester City is the greatest team in England GB but after watching Arsenal's beautiful game in the league, I changed my mind, Arsenal is the best team in the world. Love from Somali sososososos.' For the fan, Arsenal's style of football, which is part of the Arsenal brand played an integral part as to why he/she chose to become loyal to Arsenal and not Manchester City. Thus after watching Arsenal's 'beautiful games' he/she is aware of Arsenal as the 'best team in the world.' This iterates the existence of an Arsenal fan base in the East African region, where I am from. In secondary school, I studied with some Somalian students who well and truly loved football. Ironically, I can hardly remember any of them supporting Arsenal. They were mostly Real Madrid and Barcelona fans, and one even played football for the FC Twente academy in Holland before relocating to Nairobi. Sometimes, I wonder where some of these students have reached in life given the tough circumstances that some endured in Somali at a time of harsh tribal and political

turmoil. I am glad that they found temporary refuge in Nairobi and that I got to study and even play football with them. From an auto-netnographical standpoint, here, the punditry text from a Somalian fan has gone beyond revealing a sense of awareness of the Arsenal brand from him/her to triggering some old memories of mine of when life brought me and some Somalian students who loved football together.

In Rory's (an Arsenal fan from the YouTube channel Rory Talks Football) post-match interview where Arsenal lost 4-1 to Manchester City away from home, he insisted that Arsenal need a new high-quality striker. In this regard, one fan said, 'Finally, a sensible comment. GET A WORLD-CLASS STRIKER!! Someone who strikes fear and can take the attention off the wingers.' Here, the fan seems to be frustrated by the number of subjective opinionated post-match interviews from other AFTV members after the heavy defeat the team incurred against Manchester City. For this fan, a world-class striker is one who is so good that he strikes fear in opponents' defenders and keeps their attention on himself giving wingers freedom from being marked by defenders. Thus, here the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand as a team that simply needs a world class striker. In Kelechi's interview where Arsenal defeated Chelsea 3-1 at home one fan said, 'Football nice. The future is really bright for this Gunners side.' Here, the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand as a team which plays 'nice' football and has a 'really' bright future. This is because the Arsenal team are still largely a young prolific team.

In Lee Judges' post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Newcastle 2-0 away from home, one fan said, 'I think Arsenal has the most number of away wins after 18 years. That's an incredible achievement considering how young this team are. That shows these lads can handle pressure. They just need more quality additions in order to compete with city (Manchester City).' Here, the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand as a young team which has achieved an incredible statistic of having the most number of away wins after 18 years. Additionally, the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand as a young team that can handle moments of pressure well, and need more quality player recruits to closely compete with Manchester City for the EPL title. In Kelechi's postmatch interview where Arsenal defeated Wolverhampton 5-0 at home, one fan said, 'Fantastic season.' Here, the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand simply as a team that had a fantastic season. Yes, the team had some disappointing results towards the end of their EPL campaign, but overall, they finished second against an extremely talented

Manchester City side. For the fan and myself this is a 'Fantastic season' in and of itself.

6.3.2. Brand influencer texts

As noted in the previous chapter, these are texts that showcase the influence of AFTV key members on the brand awareness of Arsenal fans. In Lee Judges' post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Leicester City 4-2 at home, one fan said, 'Really good evaluation of where we're at. Our game management has to improve and I believe it will. Let's take it game by game but right now, we look like we can attack and cause any team problems.' Triggered by Lee's match evaluation, here the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand as a team that can cause 'any team' defensive issues through attacking plays. In Helen's post-match interview for the match where Arsenal defeated Fulham 2-1 at home, she showed support for Martin Odegaard, Arsenal's captain. In this regard, there was support for her remarks within the AFTV community (see figure 60). Here, both fans are aware of the Arsenal brand through Helen's positive remarks about Martin Odegaard. The first fan shows respect for Helen's opinion for giving Martin Odegaard 'his props,' which is an informal way of noting that she gave the player the praise he deserves due to his excellent on-field performance. The second fan uses the term 'big up' which is Jamaican patois for respect or praise, to show admiration for Helen's opinion and notes that Martin Odegaard is on the way to becoming an Arsenal legend.



In the same post-match interview, Robbie interviewed Helen and noted that he loved that she wore Arsenal's Jamaican inspired training jersey/pre-match kit. An example of this jersey is displayed in figure 61. It was designed with the Jamaican flag's colours of black, green and yellow to pay homage to Arsenal's Jamaican fan community. In this regard, one fan said, 'I love her in the kit as well.' Here, the fan is aware of the

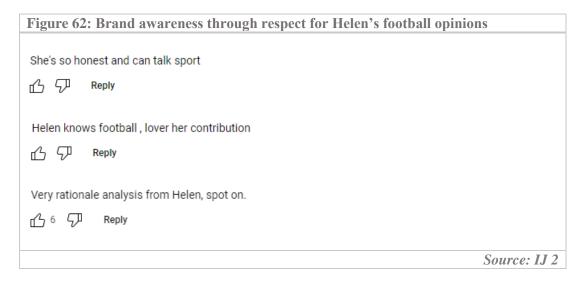
Arsenal brand through Helen's wearing of Arsenal's Jamaican inspired training jersey. Another fan said, 'Helen knows the game and she knows the Jamaican Arsenal FC kit is sickI want buy 2 right now where in Jamaica JM can I buy one fambo.' Here, the fan is also aware of the Arsenal brand through the Jamaican inspired training jersey and uses the word 'sick' to describe it, which is an informal way of saying it is amazing. Additionally, he/she is willing to purchase two of the jerseys and is asking where they can be purchased in Jamaica (JM is short for Jamaica).



Culturally, the fan uses the word 'fambo,' which in Jamaican patois means 'family.' When noting that 'Helen knows the game...,' the fan is appreciative of Helen's opinion of the Arsenal match in her post-match interview. Furthermore, other fans also shared the same sentiments as depicted in figure 62. Here, all three fans are aware of the Arsenal brand through Helen's opinions of the Arsenal match in her post-match interview.

From an auto-netnographic perspective, as an Arsenal fan and individual who is part of the fabric of society, I fully support gender diversity in sport and thus, I am not quite comfortable with the first comment which notes that Helen 'can talk sport.' Although the fan might mean well, the fact that a woman 'can talk sport' should not be a prominent point to be made as this should rather be obvious. Additionally, it subtly suggests that it is unusual for a woman to 'talk sport.' Sadly, this indicates that there is still much to be done in football regarding the normalising of women's involvement in football discussions. However, Helen here has gone beyond

influencing a sense of awareness about the Arsenal brand from fans, to perhaps pioneering the involvement of women in football Fan TV YouTube communities. Thus, I too will use Jamaican patois like some of my fellow Arsenal fans and say 'Big up Helen!'



In Turkish's post-match interview for the match where Arsenal defeated Everton 4-0 at home, he talked about the importance of squad rotation, which is when the manager strategically plays members of Arsenal's second team so as to avoid fatiguing and/or overusing the first team players. In this regard, one fan said, 'Turkish is spot on. Squad rotation is key to support a title push. Still a long way to go but I think we can really push for this title now. COYG.' Here, the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand by acknowledging that Turkish is right, thus, showing that Turkish's opinions hold high regard amongst some Arsenal fans within the AFTV community. In this light, another fan said, 'Turkish is one of the people I always look forward to hearing from after the game. Thank you AFTV.' Here, the Arsenal fan is aware of the Arsenal brand through Turkish's post-match interviews and even anticipates them after Arsenal's games. In Robbie's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Brentford 3-0 away from home, Robbie noted that the team's victory was dedicated to the late Queen Elizabeth II who passed on ten days earlier to the game. In this regard, some fans shared their remarks on Robbie's comment (see figure 63).

Figure 63: Negative brand awareness from Robbie's comment on dedicating Arsenal's win to the queen

"That's for our queen" Robbie is the new uncle Thomas

We don't celebrate colonisers. That was for Arsenal not the queen

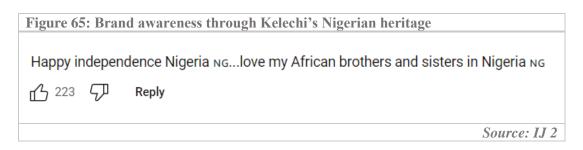
Source: IJ 2

The first comment relates to American literature, specifically the 1852 novel 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' by Harriet Beecher Stowe. The African American character 'Uncle Tom' is known for his loyalty, kindness, and piety. Thus over the years, an African American person who is nicknamed 'Uncle Tom' is known to be very subservient or deferential to Caucasian Americans, often to the detriment of their own racial group. In relation to describing Robbie as 'Uncle Thomas' the somewhat British version of the character 'Uncle Tom,' the fan is showing dissent towards dedicating Arsenal's win to the late Queen Elizabeth II. The second fan is also vehemently disagreeing with Robbie's remarks. He/she is subjectively aware of the Arsenal brand as a football club that does not celebrate the life of a leader whose government supposedly lead a colonialist regime. Additionally, there is also a comment concerning Arsenal's former striker and arguably one of the EPL's best players, Theirry Henry who is regarded as an Arsenal legend (see figure 64). Although this comment was depicted as subconscious brand loyalty text earlier in the chapter, it also holds ground in being viewed as a brand influencer text enticed by Robbie's comment in his post-match interview. In this regard, it showcases a form of positive brand awareness for the Arsenal brand through Arsenal's former player Theirry Henry. For this fan, Thierry Henry who is part of the Arsenal brand is viewed as royalty equivalent to the pinnacle of British monarchy.



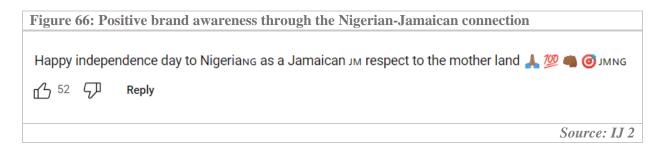
In the midst of the dissent to Robbie's dedication of Arsenal's victory against Brentford to the late Queen, one fan said, 'Queen Elizabeth II: RIP.' And another fan said, 'Yes we are the Royal Arsenal.' Here, the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand as 'the Royal Arsenal.' In light of this, originally, Arsenal was called 'Dial Square' as it was founded in December 1886 by a number of munitions workers at the Royal Arsenal in Woolwich, London. It was after their first match that the club changed the name to 'Royal Arsenal,' which was used from 1886 to 1891. Hence the fan's awareness of the Arsenal brand as the Royal Arsenal, and thus agreeing with Robbie's dedication of the Arsenal win to royalty, the late Queen Elizabeth II.

In Kelechi's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated their local North London rivals Tottenham Hotspurs 3-1 at home, Robbie, who was interviewing him noted that it was Nigeria's independence day. In this regard, one fan shared his/her sentiments towards this (see figure 65). Here, the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand as a team whose fans have created a platform (AFTV) for him/her to share messages to his/her 'African brothers and sisters in Nigeria.'



In this light, a Jamaican fan sent his/her best wishes to Nigerian fans (see figure 66). Here the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand as a team whose fans have formed a platform (AFTV) where he/she can send best wishes to Nigerians celebrating their country's independence day. Additionally, the Jamaican fan said, 'Respect to the mother land' in this case 'Africa' where numerous Jamaican ancestors hailed from,

largely due to the unfortunate Trans-Atlantic slave trade which peaked in the 18th century.



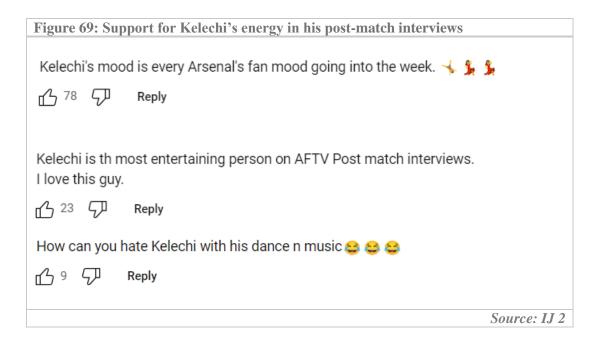
With regard to Nigeria's independence day, a fan from Ghana and one from Tanzania shared their positive sentiments about Nigerians (see figure 67). Both fans are aware of the Arsenal brand as a team whose fans have created a platform (AFTV) where they can both wish Nigerians a happy independence day, despite coming from different nationalities. As an African Arsenal fan and researcher, I believe that football club brands can move beyond simply sharing a social media post to show recognition of their African fan base's independence day, which is the norm. Independence day for respective African communities is very special, considering the extreme hardships that many Africans suffered in their fight for freedom, from colonial oppression. Certainly in Kenya, my home country, the Mau Mau freedom fighters who stem from my tribal heritage, the Kikuyus, sacrificed their lives in their cause for our country's uhuru (freedom in Swahili). Here, brand influencer texts that have been inspired by Kelechi, have gone beyond simply showcasing a sense of awareness about the Arsenal brand, and delved into the realm of uniting some of us African and Jamaican fans (whose ancestral land is Africa) together.



In Kelechi's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Nottingham Forest 5-0 at home, Kelechi's jubilant presence catalysed by his ritual of playing afro-pop music and dancing with fellow Arsenal fans does not go unnoticed. In this regard, one fan said, 'Always looking towards Kelechi's post-match interview. His vibes are unparalleled. He epitomizes that true Naija spirit. Love him so much.' Here, the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand as a team whose fans have a created a platform (AFTV) where Kelechi can jubilantly express his Nigerian culture through music and dance, thus, epitomising 'the true Naija spirit.' 'Naija' is a colloquial term often used by Nigerians to mean 'Nigeria.' Additionally, it carries a sense of national pride and identity for numerous Nigerians to the extent that Nike, the Nigerian Football National team's kit designer incorporated the term in one of the team's kit designs (see figure 68).



Regarding the same post-match interview, some fans show support for Kelechi (see figure 69). The first fan is aware of the Arsenal brand through Kelechi's elated mood, even insisting that it represents 'every' Arsenal fan's mood as they approach a new week. For the second fan, Kelechi is the 'most entertaining person' on AFTV's post-match interviews, thus he/she is aware of the Arsenal brand through Kelechi's entertainment value. The third fan is aware of the Arsenal brand through Kelechi's likability, which is brought to light through ritually playing afro-pop music and dancing before his post-match interviews.



In a post-match interview of an Arsenal fan where the team defeated Brighton & Hove Albion 4-2 away from home, one fan said, 'People doubt this young team, we talk of belief. This Arsenal will go all the way and win the League.' Here, the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand as a young team that he/she believes 'will go all the way' and win the EPL title. Within the same post-match interview, a fan uses Nigerian pidgin to share his/her sentiments about the Arsenal team. The fan said, 'This gooner is so me. We are the new Arsenal so any team that cometh our way go collect woto woto.' Here, the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand as the 'new Arsenal' and any team that faces them is going to lose the match by a large scoreline. The phrase 'go collect woto woto' is Nigerian pidgin, which in this case suggests a team is going be severely defeated or punished. Additionally, 'woto woto' is a Nigerian slang term frequently used to describe the intensity or severity of an action.

In a post-match interview of a guest Arsenal fan, where the team drew 0-0 with Newcastle at home, one fan said, 'If Arsenal Keep signing technical players only, players with no physical presence and height in the box, more Newcastle like approaches are going to appear at Emirates. Please tell Arteta to Get in MUDRYK for the wings, BUT try get in a different striker to Gabriel Jesus. Think about players with profiles like: VLAHOVIC, TAMMY ABRAHAM, MITROVIC, WOUT WEGHORST... Stop the JOAO FELIX Plan, it won't help.' Here, the fan is urging the club to sign football players with strong physical qualities as he/she is aware of the

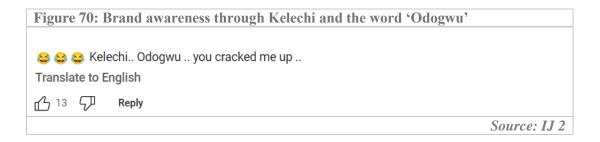
Arsenal brand as a team that often signs technical players and players who have no physical presence and height in the opponent's defensive area.

In Ty's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Tottenham Hotspurs 2-0 away from home, he showed support for organisations such as the Black Lives Matter movement and thanked people within different service industries including the National Health Service (NHS) as he often does before his post-match interviews. In this regard, one fan said, 'Ty is such a genuinely nice human being.' Another fan said, 'As much as we laugh at Ty, the guy has a good heart.' In this light, another fan said, 'Much love for Ty: lifelong fan, has a lot of empathy for people around him, thinks about the Arsenal as a whole club, just an incredible human being.' Here, the fans are aware of the Arsenal brand as a team that has fans who created a platform (AFTV) where Ty can share his support for various service organisations. This support plays an integral role in how they are aware of the club, thus: 1) for the first fan, Arsenal has Ty, a fan who is 'such a genuinely nice human being'; 2) for the second fan, Arsenal has Ty, a person who 'has a good heart'; and 3) for the third fan, Arsenal has Ty, a lifelong Arsenal fan who has 'a lot of empathy for people around him,' who 'thinks about the Arsenal as a whole club, and an incredible human being.'

In Kelechi's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Aston Villa 4-2 away from home, he sang a song for Jorginho with fellow fans, Arsenal's midfielder who scored the team's winning goal to make the scoreline 3-2. In this regard, one fan said, 'That song for Jorginho Brilliant, I love Arsenal.' Here the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand through the song dedicated to Jorginho by Kelechi during the post-match interview. In Jason's interview where Arsenal defeated Leicester City 1-0 away from home, some fans showed support for him. One fan said, 'Man like Jason is always on point.' Another fan said, 'Great analysis Jason .' It is worth noting that a part of London's multicultural youth culture, the phrase 'Man like' is part of Multicultural London English (MLE), a dialect that embraces parts of languages and cultures in London. It is used to show someone respect and support. In this case, when the fan said, 'Man like Jason...,' he/she was showing respect and support for Jason. Additionally, here both fans are aware of the Arsenal brand through Jason's AFTV post-match interview.

In Helen's post-match interview where Arsenal drew 2-2 with Liverpool away from home, some fans displayed their support for Helen's opinions of the match. One fan

said, 'Helen is so real!' which is an informal way of saying that Helen's opinions about the Arsenal brand are authentic and unbiased. In this light, one fan said, 'Helen speaks beautiful. Breath of fresh air.' And another said, 'Helen, I always love your interviews. 'Although the larger football community has a long way to go in terms of embracing women's voices in football as mentioned earlier, this suggests that some fans in the AFTV community are receptive of a woman sharing her opinion about football despite the hyper-masculine nature of online football communities, where women's voices are sadly, often discouraged and disregarded. Support for Helen is further cemented by a few comments from fans who really appreciate her opinion about Arsenal. One fan said, 'Thank you, @Helen. Yours is the most accurate assessment of all the first 22 videos in this playlist. Our boys rubber-stamped their seriousness about winning the league at Anfield today. I honestly think we missed Nketiah today. I'd have brought him on to replace Saka, kept Jesus on to occupy the centre halves, and give Martinelli some kombucha tea to give him extra energy for those last few minutes. But, we did VERY, VERY, VERY well last night and I'm proud of those boys. C'mon you gunners!!' Here, the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand as a team that 'rubber-stamped their seriousness about winning' the EPL title at Liverpool's home stadium, which is known to be a difficult place for teams to come and win because of the ferocious atmosphere their fans create. In Kelechi's post-match interview where Arsenal drew 3-3 with Southampton at home, one fan was impressed by Kelechi's reaction to the result (see figure 70). Here, the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand through Kelechi, a key member of the AFTV community. Additionally, in the Nigerian language of Igbo and in Igbo culture, 'Odogwu' refers to someone held in high esteem, a hero and/or a well-respected person who has achieved something noteworthy towards a community. Thus for the fan (likely Nigerian), Kelechi is an Odogwu within the AFTV community.



6.3.3. Rival fan texts

As noted in the previous chapter, these are texts that showcase brand awareness of the Arsenal brand from fans of different clubs. In Robbie's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Bournemouth 3-0 away from home, a non-Arsenal fan who supports Liverpool said, 'This is coming from a Liverpool fan, I am so happy for Arsenal they look like a proper team this season watching Arsenal fan TV about time your fans are happy I was a big fan of Ian Wright when I was Young, good that the Premier League top teams are coming back up like Nottingham Forest.' Here, the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand as a 'proper' team. In English football, the term 'proper' is used to describe an excellent team, thus the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand as an excellent team. Additionally, he/she watches AFTV (formally known as Arsenal fan TV) and has noticed that Arsenal's team has made the fans happy.

In Robbie's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Leeds United 1-0 away from home, a Leeds United fan said, 'Leeds here. We should have got at least a point but that's football. From your perspective you showed a lot of resilience in that second half in a pressure cooker atmosphere which bodes well for your title chances. Good luck guys.' Here, the Leeds United fan is aware of the Arsenal brand as a team that showed 'a lot of resilience' in the 'second half' of the game where the attacking pressure from the Leeds United team was extremely high. In Robbie's post-match interview where Arsenal lost to Everton 1-0 away from home, an Everton fan said, 'Everton fan here, I thought we deserved the win today but Arsenal looked dangerous when they got round our box. I think Arsenal have the capabilities to be champions but it's not a certainty. There's a long way to go. It's all about how you bounce back from a poor performance and I think you've got the players to bounce back. Good luck for the rest of the season, I hope you lot win the title over City . Here, the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand as: 1) a team who were good when their attackers were in the defensive area of Everton's team; 2) a team that has the capacity to become EPL champions; and 3) a team that has the players who can come back to winning ways after a poor quality on-field performance. Additionally, the Everton fan was in support of Arsenal's team and hoped that they would win the title over their rivals for the season, Manchester City.

In Lee Judges post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Leeds United 4-1 at home, one fan said, 'As a Liverpool fan, I hope you gunners win it. Good luck.' Here, the

Liverpool fan is aware of the Arsenal brand as a team that he/she wants to win the EPL title. In Helen's post-match interview where Arsenal drew 2-2 with Liverpool away from home, there was support for the Arsenal brand from a Liverpool fan (see figure 71). Here, the Liverpool fan is aware of the Arsenal brand as an impressive team that plays entertaining football and is finally a hard opponent to defeat for Liverpool after previous seasons.

Figure 71: Brand awareness from a Liverpool fan

As a Liverpool fan, I'm so used to impressive, entertaining football. So this season I've watched every single Arsenal game coz of how entertaining they are. This was definitely the most entertaining one. Jesus is like a faster, younger, in form Firmino! As I tell all my Arsenal fan friends, "I CAN'T BELIEVE THIS IS THE SAME ARSENAL FROM PREVIOUS SEASONS "BRINGING" IT AT ANFIELD.

10 5 Repl

Source: I.J 2

From the onset, the Liverpool fan subconsciously showcases his/her loyalty to the Arsenal games simply because of how entertaining they have been to watch. He/she is also aware of the Arsenal brand as a team that have drastically transformed into a team that is playing well at Liverpool's home stadium.

6.4. Perceived quality

Within the theme of perceived quality, a dimension of Aaker (1991) brand equity concept, perceived quality of the Arsenal brand is discussed under the following subtheme: Punditry texts, community jargon and symbolic texts.

6.4.1. Punditry texts, community jargon and symbolic texts

As noted in the previous chapter, these are texts that showcase fans taking the role of pundits often using community jargon and some symbolic texts. In the game where Arsenal defeated Leicester City 4-2 at home, Lee judges was interviewed after the game. Within the comment section, a fan made a remark about Bukayo Saka as depicted in figure 72. Here, the fan notes that Bukayo Saka did not have a positive onfield performance as compared to the team's previous season, and despite this the team 'won easily.' This can be mis-understood as a form of negative perceived quality related to Bukayo Saka, who is part of the Arsenal brand because the fan notes that the player hasn't played his 'best' in the first two games of the season.

Figure 72: Perceived quality through season comparison of the player Bukayo Saka

The difference between this and last season is Saka didnt play his best these two games and we still won easily

189 57 Reply

Source: IJ 2

However, the comment is also a form of positive perceived quality for the team, which is part of the Arsenal brand in that, they are excellent to the extent that when one of their best players, Bukayo Saka isn't displaying his best on-field performance, the team wins 'easily.' Thus, Arsenal's team is not overly reliant on one player. In Robbie's interview where Arsenal defeated Brentford 3-0 away from home, one fan said, 'Nice kick about with the boys.' In UK football culture, this is a way of saying that playing against the opponents was so easy that it felt like a casual game of football with friends at a local park. Here, the fan perceives the Arsenal team which is part of the Arsenal brand as a team of high quality so much so, that it makes winning against the opponents look relaxed. Additionally, this was a reply to Brentford's striker Ivan Toney's tweet 'Just a kick about with the boys' after his team defeated Arsenal 2-0 in the opening game of the EPL season 2021/22.

In Robbie's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Leeds United 1-0 away from home, one fan showed support for Granit Xhaka. The fan said, 'Xhaka was man of the match (MOM) for me....he literally got the referee to check the screen and reverse his penalty award, and Gabriel's red card - that alone made him MOM.' For context, in an incidence where Gabriel Magalhães was initially awarded a red card by the referee due to a foul on Leeds United's striker Patrick Bamford, the referee reversed the decision, which the fan suggests is due to pressure from Granit Xhaka. Although this might not be true, even though Granit Xhaka had a brief conversation with him, this is a high-quality indicator for a player's on-field performance for the fan, to the extent of even describing the player as his/her 'man of the match.' Within the same post-match interview, one fan said, 'Gabriel also played well, he made crucial blocks.' For this fan, a high-quality indicator of Gabriel Magalhães' on-field performances are his 'crucial' defensive 'blocks' of the opposition's shots at goal. In Turkish's post-match interview where Arsenal drew 1-1 with Southampton, a few

regard to the team's on-field performances are: 1) the team's tiredness; and 2) lack of being clinical with goal scoring chances created. Another fan said, 'This was coming, our football hasn't been anywhere near as fluid in games and today our luck ran out, albeit we missed great chances today that's frustrating.' For this fan, key low-quality indicators of the team's on-field performances are: 1) the lack of 'fluid' or positive uninterrupted passages of football; and 2) missed opportunities to score goals when the team is at the opponent's defensive area. In the same post-match interview another fan said, 'We've been poor lately in the second half of games and look shattered... poor passes, no hold up plays or creativity.' For this fan, key low-quality indicators concerning the team's on-field performances are: 1) poor passes by the team's players; 2) no 'hold up' plays from the striker or when the striker does not hold the ball enough to invite attacking midfielders into the attack; and 3) no creative attacks for goal scoring opportunities.

In Kelechi's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Nottingham Forest 5-0 at home, Kelechi shared his remarks on the number of players who shared goals in the game. Concerning this, one fan quoted Kelechi's words and said, 'I love that... "We're not stingy here, one man should not be scoring all the goals and taking all the glory for himself" it's about the team.' For this fan, a top-quality indicator of the Arsenal brand is teamwork. Specifically, when several members of the team score goals, hence the phrase 'We're not stingy...' which is an informal way of noting that the team is not selfish when it comes to scoring goals. In Robbie's interview, where Arsenal defeated Chelsea 1-0 away from home, one fan said, '34 out of 38 points. Incredible!' For this fan, a top-quality indicator of the Arsenal brand is points gathered during the EPL season. In this sense, the fact that the team had acquired 34 out of 38 points in the season up to that point, is 'Incredible!' Additionally, one fan corrected him/her and replied, '39*.' And another said, 'Unbelievable!' For both these fans (the first and the third), points accumulated by Arsenal's team during the EPL season are an indicator of Arsenal's quality as a team.

In Robbie's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Chelsea 1-0 away from home, some fans made remarks about the team's quality. One fan said, 'The way we attack in packs and with unrelenting pressure on their defence is simply awesome. We only lack more goals.' For the fan, a top-quality indicator of the Arsenal brand is a team that attacks in groups (or as packs which is a connection to how wolves and/or

lions attack their prey) and while doing so, applies 'unrelenting pressure' on the opposition's defence. Another fan said, 'Some of our 1 touch passing out from the back while under pressure was a joy to watch.' For this fan, a top-quality indicator of the Arsenal brand is the '1 touch passing' style of play from defence to attack. Additionally, this is a part of Arsenal's brand of football, which is similar to or also known as the Total football philosophy or style of play. This philosophy/style of play was brought to fame by the late Johan Cruyff who managed Barcelona from 1988 to 1996.

In Lee Judges interview where Arsenal defeated Wolverhampton 1-0 at home, one fan said, '5 points clear at the break. Arsenal is looking like a different beast this season!' This is a form of perceived quality through the word 'beast.' For this fan, a top-quality indicator of the Arsenal brand is a team that looks like a 'beast.' In this context, this is slang for a team that is delivering extremely high-quality on-field performances. Within the same post-match interview, one fan supported Lee Judge's remarks and said, 'Lee is spot on – the expectation is definitely different this season which would mean week in week out, other teams are gonna start pounding on us – there will be that consistent pressure which will start hitting us even more when we return back after Xmas. Just thankful our manager has his head on his shoulders and will know how to balance the pressure with performance. COYG!' For this fan, a top-quality indicator of the Arsenal brand is the team has a manager who '...has his head on his shoulders and will know how to balance pressure with performance.' The phrase 'head on his shoulders' is a way of saying the manager is wise, intelligent and able to make good judgement. Thus, for this fan, the manager's leadership is an integral part of Arsenal's brand quality.

In Robbie's post-match interview, where Arsenal lost to Everton 1-0 away from home, one fan said, 'Everton got our number, this is our 3rd straight defeat at their ground. Our build up was slow and lethargic.' For this fan, a low-quality indicator of the Arsenal brand is the team's slow and lethargic build up in their play, which are team passages and transitions from goal keeper to the defensive players and finally to the midfielders and/or strikers. In Robbie's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Fulham 3-0 away from home, one fan said, 'It's not just the results but we are by far playing the best football to watch in the league this season. So much creativity, flare and passion!' For this fan, a quality indicator is the result the team achieves from their

on-field performance but it's not just that, the teams creativity, flare and passion are part of what makes their football quality the 'best to watch in the league.'

In Jason's post-match interview where Arsenal drew 2-2 away from home, he remarked that the draw felt like a defeat. In this regard, one fan said, 'Jason, spot on review! But you are right this feels like a loss and honestly, I am doubtful we will win the league because it's in City's (Manchester City's) hands and they have more experience being in this position.' The fan's comment here could suggest that the Arsenal brand is being associated with the negative feeling of defeat. However, it stands as a form of perceived quality whereby, the team's consistent positive on-field performances have set a standard of winning so much so that a draw which isn't necessarily a negative result depending on the circumstance, feels like defeat for the fan. In Kelechi's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Chelsea 3-1 at home, one fan said, 'I am not convinced by that. Nice passages, but at 3-1 I got nervous. Lot of sloppiness a good team would have punished. Newcastle will be in our face. Still not confident for that game. Big relief to get back to winning but Chelsea were dross and won last hour 1-0. We really need to beat Newcastle and take it to end or to sweeten the bitter taste of the last 4. Great finishes by Odegaard though.' For this fan, a high-quality indicator is a team that does not easily give away the ball to the opponent hence the use of the harsh word 'sloppiness.'

In Lee Judges' post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Newcastle 2-0, some fans were impressed with how Kieran Tierney, Arsenal's defender played. In this regard, one fan said, 'I hope we can find a solution for Tierney's game time. I don't want to lose him this summer. He came on and solidified our defence. He has that dog in him.' For this fan, Kieran Tierney is a key player for the team. Additionally, a top-quality indicator for him/her is Kieran Tierney's fighting spirit hence the use of the phrase, 'He has that dog in him.' This phrase is often used to describe someone who has unwavering strength and resilience despite his/her negative circumstances. Indeed, one fan says, 'I hope Tierney stays, he is an old school defender, he's got heart and is solid, reminds me of the old school tough guy defenders back in the days.' For this fan, a high-quality indicator that is linked to Kieran Tierney, who is a part of the Arsenal brand is his fierce determination, which in football is often associated to defenders in the 1990s and early 2000s, hence the term 'old-school' to describe them. In modern slang, this term is used to describe things or people of an earlier period. For example,

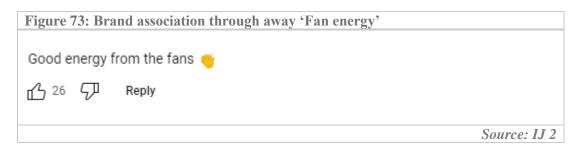
in football, old-school defenders would be players such as Paolo Maldini, Sol Campbell, Cafu and Jaap Stam.

6.5. Brand associations

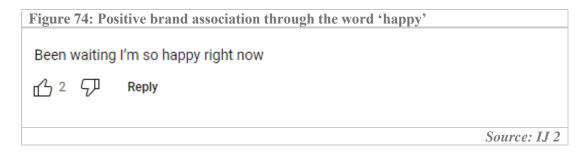
Within the theme of brand associations, a dimension of Aaker (1991) brand equity concept, associations of the Arsenal brand are discussed under the following subtheme: Away fan and affective analytical texts

6.5.1. Away fan and affective analytical texts

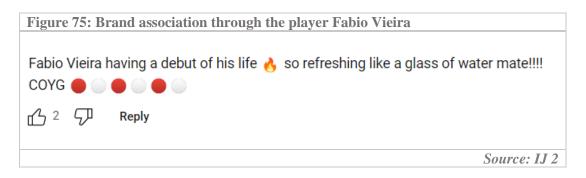
In the context of this study, away fan and affective analytical texts showcase the emotional connection between fans (including away fans) and the Arsenal brand. In the game where Arsenal defeated Crystal Palace 2-0 away from home, under Lee Judges' post-match interview, one fan made a remark about the energy from Arsenal fans who travelled to Crystal Palace to watch the Arsenal team playing (see figure 73). Here, the fan is associating the Arsenal brand with having fans who have 'Good energy.' In football, it is energetic home stadium support from fans that is usually noticeable, however in this case the fan notices that the Arsenal fans who were at another team's stadium, were energetic. They are often known as away fans who often travel to opponent's stadiums to watch their favourite football team playing against an opponent.



In Lee Judges' post-match interview of the game where Arsenal defeated Leicester City 4-2 at home, one fan showcased his/her happiness with the Arsenal brand (see figure 74). Here the fan associates the feeling of happiness with the Arsenal brand through the team's on-field performances. The fan also indicates that he/she has been waiting for Lee Judges' post-match interview on AFTV so as to see how fellow Arsenal fans reacted to the team's victory against Leicester City.



In Robbie's post-match interview for Arsenal's match where they defeated Brentford 3-0 away from home, one fan shared his/her remarks about Fabio Vieira, Arsenal's young Portuguese midfielder (see figure 75). Here the fan is associating the feeling of being refreshed 'like a glass of water' to Fabio Vieira's on-field performance during the player's debut or first game as an Arsenal player. Additionally, Fabio Vieira scored an excellent goal from a long-range effort towards goal.



In Kelechi's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Aston Villa 4-2 away from home, Kelechi was as jovial and excited as he often is. In this regard, one fan said, 'Coming from Africa Kelechi is the typical example of a proper supporter. I always feel happy when I see him.' Here, the fan associates a feeling of happiness to Kelechi, a well-known Arsenal supporter who plays an integral part within the AFTV community. Additionally, for this fan, Kelechi's African roots are relatable because he/she is also an African Arsenal fan. For him/her Kelechi represents the typical Arsenal fan from Africa because of his energy and positive vibes. In this light, a fan said, 'Kelechi is the positive fan that all clubs need.' In Belgium's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Bournemouth 3-2, one fan said, 'Belgium is so unique in a good way, the way we came back was amazing, the feeling is untouched and utterly beautiful.' This is a form of brand association whereby, the Arsenal team, which is part of the Arsenal brand is associated with an 'untouched' and 'beautiful'

feeling because of how the team came back from 2-0 to make it 3-2 in dramatic fashion.

6.6. Chapter Summary

This chapter presented a thematic analysis of data collected from the netnographic immersion journal of AFTV, a Fan TV community on YouTube. The themes in this chapter were thematic and/or theoretically guided by Aaker (1991) brand equity concept, which has the following dimensions: 1) Brand loyalty; 2) Brand awareness; 3) Perceived quality; and 4) Brand associations. Thus, the first theme in this chapter was brand loyalty and its sub-themes were: 1) conscious brand loyalty texts; 2) subconscious brand loyalty texts; and 3) brand influencer texts. The second theme presented in this chapter was brand awareness and its sub-themes were: 1) punditry texts; 2) brand influencer texts; and 3) rival fan texts. The third theme in this chapter was perceived quality and its sub-theme was punditry texts, community jargon and symbolic texts. Lastly, the fourth theme highlighted in this chapter was brand associations and its sub-theme was away fan and affective analytical texts. This chapter then closes with a chapter summary. The next chapter discusses the major findings presented here in relation to how they answer this study's research questions. Additionally, the chapter depicts how the findings compare to past research, and why they are crucial to both Aaker's concept of brand equity and practice.

DISCUSSION

7.1. Introduction

This study focuses on how brand equity exists within official and Fan TV YouTube communities. In this light, this chapter discusses this study's major findings based on the thematic data analysis of the following netnographic immersion journals: 1) IJ 1—Arsenal's official; and 2) IJ 2—AFTV, as presented in the previous chapter. Additionally it depicts how the findings compare to past research, and why they are crucial to: 1) answering this study's research questions; 2) contributing to Aaker (1991) concept of brand equity; and 3) contributing to the good practice of nurturing and maintaining football clubs' brand equity. Thus, it begins by discussing the findings in light of answering the following research questions:

- 1. How is the brand equity of a football club showcased through digital data traces within football official and Fan TV YouTube channels?
- 2. How is the brand equity of a football club showcased comparatively with regard to football official and Fan TV YouTube channels?
- 3. How do various football fan segments within football official and Fan TV YouTube channels showcase brand equity of a football club?
- 4. How do digital data traces within football official and Fan TV YouTube channels showcase new and interrelated brand equity dimensions?
- 5. How can football clubs nurture and maintain brand equity within football official and Fan TV YouTube channels?

This chapter then presents the importance of the findings to both theory and practice. In this case, Aakers (1991) brand equity concept, and the practice of nurturing and maintaining football clubs' brand equity.

7.2. Q1 How is the brand equity of a football club showcased through digital data traces within football official and Fan TV YouTube channels?

7.2.1. Brand loyalty - Arsenal's official YouTube channel

With regard to this study's first question, brand loyalty within Arsenal's official YouTube channel where match highlights are concerned, is showcased in the following ways: 1) Ritual texts; 2) Conscious brand loyalty texts; and 3) Subconscious brand loyalty texts.

7.3.1.1. Ritual texts

Here, brand loyalty by an Arsenal fan is showcased through the continuous and ritual watching of the team's match highlights, which are part of the Arsenal brand. For example, in chapter 5, with regard to Arsenal's match highlights vs Leicester City where the team won 2-0 at home, one fan shared his/her remarks. The fan said, 'As true Arsenal fans, we watch the match live and still rush to watch the highlights \(\rightarrow\) The fan ritually watches the live match and the highlights of the same match as activity authentic Arsenal fans participate in. In this light, Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) note that due to the global nature of brands, they surpass geography enabling them to include a large number of members who possess an awareness of mass-media. They further note that brand communities showcase, three traditional markers, namely, consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, and moral responsibility. They add that brand community rituals and traditions function to maintain the culture of the community. Moreover, they are used to reproduce and transmit the meaning of a community based on shared consumption experiences with the brand. Such rituals and traditions include celebrating brand history, sharing stories based on brand experiences etc.

7.3.1.2. Conscious brand loyalty texts

This occurs when an Arsenal fan intentionally or consciously showcases his/her loyalty to the Arsenal brand. Additionally, this could occur regardless of both positive or negative on-field performances by the team. For example, one fan said, '24 years of becoming an Arsenal fan since 1998 when I was still 6 years old, been supporting this club through ups and down thank God finally we could see a glimpse of our beloved club back on track to become a title contender again.' From this piece of text, the fan consciously showcases his/her loyalty to the Arsenal brand through: 1) Mentioning how long he/she has been supporting Arsenal; and 2) His/her support of this club through both positive and negative on-field performances. This finding is in contrast to a study by Khajuria and Rachna (2017), which focused on the impact of social media brand communications on consumer based brand equity. Their study found that social media brand communications fail to create an understanding of a brands' loyalty. Furthermore, contrary to their findings, this study found that brand loyalty can also be expressed subconsciously by a consumer.

7.3.1.3. Sub-conscious brand loyalty texts

This happens when an Arsenal fan does not necessarily showcase his/her loyalty to the Arsenal brand but sub-consciously does so. For example, in the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Leeds 1-0 away from home, and Bukayo Saka scored the winning goal, one fan said, 'What a goal by Saka. Star boy has grown so much.' Here, the fan does not intend to show that he/she is loyal to the Arsenal brand, but subconsciously does so by expressing that they have been followers of Bukayo Saka's (Star boy) journey as a young prospect to the mature first team Arsenal player he is.

7.2.2. Brand loyalty - AFTV

With regard to this study's first question, brand loyalty within AFTV where postmatch interviews from Arsenal fans, and key community members are concerned, is showcased in the following ways: 1) Ritual texts; 2) Conscious brand loyalty texts; 3) Subconscious brand loyalty texts; and 4) Brand influencers.

7.3.2.1. Ritual texts

This is where an Arsenal fan shares that he/she ritually watches a particular AFTV member's interview after an Arsenal game, thus showcasing loyalty to the Arsenal brand through this activity. For example, in Kelechi's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Nottingham Forest 5-0, one fan said, 'After the game I always come to watch Kelechi's reactions herein.' Here, the fan showcases his/her loyalty to the Arsenal brand by ritually watching Kelechi's post-match interviews on AFTV after every Arsenal game. In the literature review within the second chapter of this thesis, a study on digital rituals by Disney Advertising (2021) found that digital sports rituals and traditional sports viewing are simultaneously trending. Additionally, the study notes that: 1) "95% of sports streamers have developed at least one new 'digital ritual' around their sports fanship, from following athletes on social media to creating pregame podcasts" (p. 4); and 2) social media is where sports fans can broadcast their voice, expressing this voice is arguably the most significant digital ritual among sports fans today. In concurrence with this, the findings regarding ritual texts and AFTV suggest that the YouTube channel indeed offers fans an opportunity to express their voice on matters Arsenal in videos such as post-match interviews in their comment sections. Additionally, it extends the findings of Disney Advertising (2021) by noting

that a fan can ritually follow a brand influencer's post-match interview on YouTube channels such as AFTV as a digital ritual.

7.3.2.2. Conscious brand loyalty texts

This occurs when an Arsenal fan purposely wants to showcase his/her loyalty to the Arsenal brand regardless of the team's on-field performances. For example, in Julian's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Liverpool 3-2 at home, one fan was adamant about supporting the team. The fan said, 'If we lose Arteta to City, they will spoil him with money and players that he won't be caught by any other team. Arteta is special and we need to support the team even if we're sinking.' A key thing to note here when the fan consciously urges fellow fans to 'support the team' even when they are not delivering positive on-field performances.

7.3.2.3. Subconscious brand loyalty texts

Here, an Arsenal fan does not intend to express his/her loyalty to the Arsenal brand but subconsciously does so in different ways. For example, in Lee Judges' post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Crystal Palace 2-0 away from home, a fan said, 'After so many dropped points against lesser teams in season openers, and with all the incredible positive vibe coming from the preseason, I was cringing at the thought of "what if it is another disappointing start...." but the joy and relief this comprehensive victory against a quality side brings to my heart is incredible. Gooners!' The use of the phrase 'After so many dropped points against lesser teams in season openers...' provides insight into understanding that the fan has been loyal to the Arsenal team for many seasons as he/she recalls the team's dismal performances in opening games of the team's EPL seasons.

7.3.2.4. Brand influencer texts

This is when an Arsenal fan showcases his/her loyalty to the Arsenal brand after being spurred or encouraged by a key AFTV member such as Kelechi in a post-match interview. For example, in Kelechi's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Aston Villa 4-2 away from home, one fan said, 'This is why I like Kelechi; he is always supportive whenever we Lose or Win. This is how every Arsenal Supporter should be.' This is in light of Kelechi being known for having a positive attitude and team loyalty regardless of the team's on-field performances. Additionally, it is encouraged loyalty

to the Arsenal brand by observing Kelechi's loyalty to the team. This encouraged loyalty is extended further when the fan encourages other fans to have the same attitude as Kelechi. In this light, Kelechi can be seen as a brand loyalty social media influencer with a distinctive brand persona. In addition, Duffy (2020) reminds us that social media influencers are a subset of digital content creators defined by their large online following, distinctive brand persona, and patterned association with commercial sponsors. With regard to Kelechi's positive influence, this finding is contrary to remarks by Mayo (2020) who notes that many AFTV influencers are controversial, with fans blaming them for flaming a sense of rage around the Arsenal team.

7.2.3. Brand awareness - Arsenal's official YouTube channel

With regard to Question 1 of this study, brand awareness within Arsenal's official YouTube channel where match highlights are concerned, is showcased in the following ways: 1) Punditry texts-player; and 2) Rival fan texts.

7.3.3.1. Punditry texts

This occurs when an Arsenal fan takes on the role of a pundit and is thus aware of the Arsenal brand through the on-field performances of a specific player or team manager. For example, in match highlights where Arsenal defeated Brentford 3-0 away from home, one fan said, 'Fabio Vieira played like he's been here all his life. Shows you how good a player he is. COYG . Here, the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand by recalling how Arsenal's Portuguese midfielder, Fabio Vieira performed on the field against Brentford. Additionally, in match highlights where Arsenal defeated Brighton & Hove Albion 4-2 away from home, a fan said, 'Credit to Arteta, Edu and the coaching staff for moulding these young players into a formidable competitive team. This season's performances have restored pride back in the fanbase.' Here, the fan recalls the Arsenal brand through the appreciation of Mikel Arteta, Arsenal's team manager, his coaching staff, and Edu Gaspar who is Arsenal's technical director. For the fan, their contribution to the team has been immense, which has led to an EPL season's on-field performance worthy of 'restoring pride back in the fanbase.' Moreover, the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand as a formidable and competitive team of young players. In finding that positive on-field performances from Arsenal players,

the team manager, his staff, and technical director are part of positive awareness of the Arsenal brand. Brunello (2018) notes that teams manage to advance their perceived quality when sport achievements arrive, their notoriety is higher due to media coverage and the level of fan loyalty is enhanced when the team brings happiness to its supporters. Moreover, he asserts that the figure and reputation of the manager is also a source of brand equity in the sense that, when a club recruits a well-known manager, whose former success is appreciated by fans and the general public, it develops high expectations of sporting success from fans. This study's findings are contrary to this as Arsenal recruited a lesser-known and/or experienced manager in Mikel Arteta who was an assistant coach to Manchester City's team manager Pep Guardiola. Thus the figure and reputation of a manager does not have to be strong in that the manager is well-known or formerly successful for him/her to be a source of brand equity as in the case of Mikel Arteta and Arsenal.

7.3.3.2. Rival fan texts

This occurs when fans who support other clubs showcase positive awareness of the Arsenal brand. In match highlights where Arsenal defeated Crystal Palace 2-0 away from home, a Liverpool fan said, 'As a Liverpool fan, what a fun, exciting team to watch. Love how many young talents will develop there.' Here, the Liverpool fan is aware of the Arsenal brand as a 'fun' and 'exciting' team to watch where numerous young, talented football players 'will develop.' This suggests that positive awareness of the Arsenal brand does not necessarily stem from Arsenal fan community insiders, but a fan of another club as well, in this case Liverpool. Additionally, Liverpool might be considered a rival football club to Arsenal in their strife to win the EPL title. In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Chelsea 3-1, a Liverpool fan expressed that he/she has been living vicariously through the Arsenal brand. In this context, vicarious indicates that the Liverpool fan has been living the life of an Arsenal fan. The fan said, 'As a Liverpool fan, I've been living vicariously through Arsenal for months. Just a shame Ode (Odegaard) couldn't turn up against City. Come on the Gooners!' Here, the Liverpool fan is aware of the Arsenal brand as his/her own football club through vicarious living. He/she has even adopted the well-known Arsenal fan slogan 'Come On You Gooners!' but has altered it to 'Come On The Gooners.'

7.2.4. Brand awareness - AFTV

With regard to Question 1 of this study, brand awareness within AFTV where postmatch interviews of AFTV' key members are concerned, is showcased in the following ways: 1) Punditry texts; 2) Brand influencer texts; and 3) Rival fans.

7.3.4.1. Punditry texts

This occurs when an Arsenal fan takes on the role of a pundit and is thus aware of the Arsenal brand through on-field performances of the entire team, individual players and the team manager. For example, in Lee Judges' post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Crystal Palace 2-0, a fan said, 'I will say it again Saliba is critical and important to everything Arsenal will achieve this season.' It is worth noting that Saliba, Arsenal's young French defender scored a superb goal during the game. For this fan, William Saliba is integral to the Arsenal brand in terms of what the team achieves during the season with regard to on-field performances. Thus, the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand as a team whose defender William Saliba will be 'critical and important to everything the team will achieve' in their EPL season. In Turkish's postmatch interview where Arsenal defeated Everton 4-0, a fan said, 'Still a long way to go but I think we can really push for this title now. COYG.' Here, the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand as a team that can strongly surge forward in their attempt to win the EPL. In Julian's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Liverpool 3-2, Julian asserted that the team's manager Mikel Arteta had similar managerial qualities to Jurgen Klopp, Liverpool's well-known and experienced manager, who is considered a top-level coach in the football world. In this regard, one fan said, 'Arteta is Arteta. He is brilliant and unique, nothing like the others. No other manager could do what he has done with this Arsenal team. Super Mik Arteta indeed.' Here, the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand by recalling the team manager, Mikel Arteta and notes that he is 'brilliant and unique.' Additionally, he gives the manager the nickname 'Super Mik.' The fan says, 'Indeed' because in Arsenal's home stadium, fans often show support for Mikel Arteta by singing a song titled 'Super Mik.' Regarding the same post-match interview, a fan said, 'Arteta is a masterclass! He is his own, he is the younger modern manager who brings new! When done right with right players he can achieve lots!' Here, the fan is also aware of the Arsenal brand through Mikel Arteta and contends that he is 'a masterclass!' or in this case a high-quality manager who is younger than

Jurgen Klopp and brings 'new' footballing ideas to the team. The above fans have shown awareness of the Arsenal brand by strongly distinguishing between Mikel Arteta and Jurgen Klopp in terms of his managerial qualities. This finding is contrary to Brunello (2018) who asserted that "the figure and the reputation of the manager is also a source of brand equity. When a club hires a well-known manager, whose previous success is appreciated by the supporters and the general public, it created high expectations among the fans that their club will manage to achieve sport success" (p. 28). In this regard, Arsenal recruited a lesser-known manager whose previous success was less appreciated by supporters and the general consensus in the football world was that it was risky from Arsenal because Mikel Arteta had never managed a football club before, and was Pep Guardiola's assistant manager at Manchester City. Yet, within the AFTV community, some fans are defending Mikel Arteta with one going as far as saying, 'Arteta is a masterclass! He is his own, he is the younger modern manager who brings new!' and another saying, 'No other manager could do what he has done with this Arsenal team. Super Mik Arteta indeed' in their comparison between him and as Brunello puts it 'a well-known manager, whose previous success is appreciated by the supporters and the general public' in Jurgen Klopp.

7.3.4.2. Brand influencer texts

This occurs when an Arsenal fan is aware of the Arsenal brand through an AFTV key member's opinion, action and personality towards the Arsenal brand. For example, in Lee Judges' post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Leicester City 4-2 at home, one fan said, 'Really good evaluation of where we're at. Our game management has to improve and I believe it will. Let's take it game by game but right now, we look like we can attack and cause any team problems.' Triggered by Lee Judges' evaluation of the Arsenal team's performance vs Leicester City, the fan notes that Lee's team's assessment is 'really good' and is aware of the Arsenal brand as a team that can cause 'any team' defensive issues through attacking plays, but needs to improve its 'game management.' Kozinets (2020) asserts that the world of video blogging or 'vlogging', using YouTube videos is critically influential. Vloggers in industries such as beauty, fitness, automotive, and food attract large dedicated audiences and entice lucrative promotion deals from major brands and their companies. He adds that apart from commercial characteristics, YouTube has contributed to a massive growth in the

number and availability of independent and video programming. The findings of this study concur with this assertion as AFTV is an independent video programming channel and/or community. It also adds to his assertion concerning the growth of vloggers on YouTube, in that Lee Judges is not inherently a vlogger but a YouTube superstar (with considerable influence) within the AFTV community and football Fan TV communities at large, who regularly participates in post-match interviews on AFTV's YouTube channel.

7.3.4.3. Rival fan texts

This occurs when a non-Arsenal and/or a fan of another football club displays a sense of positive awareness towards the Arsenal brand. For example, in Robbie's post-match interview where Arsenal lost to Everton 1-0 away from home, an Everton fan said, Everton fan here, I thought we deserved the win today but Arsenal looked dangerous when they got round our box. I think Arsenal have the capabilities to be champions but it's not a certainty. There's a long way to go. It's all about how you bounce back from a poor performance and I think you've got the players to bounce back. Good luck for the rest of the season, I hope you lot win the title over City . Here, the Everton fan is positively aware of the Arsenal brand as: 1) a team that was good when their attackers were in the defensive area of Everton's team; 2) a team that has the capacity to become EPL champions; and 3) a team that has the players who can come back to winning ways after a poor quality on-field performance. Additionally, the Everton fan was in support of Arsenal's team and hoped that they win the title over their rivals for the season, Manchester City. This finding is contrary to the study on understanding the consumers' multi-competing brand community engagement by He et al. (2023) who only acknowledged the category of consumers who are extremely fond of a specific brand and participate in other brand communities to 'show off' their focal brand' and criticise rival brands or products, which they refer to as oppositional multicompeting brand engagement. Furthermore, there is a group of consumers (fans of rival football clubs), who participate in AFTV (a brand community of rival fans) not to 'show off' their focal brand (the football club they are fond of) and ridicule the Arsenal brand (a rival brand), but to actually support the Arsenal brand.

7.2.5. Perceived quality – Arsenal's official YouTube channel

With regard to Question 1 of this study, perceived quality within Arsenal's official YouTube channel where match highlights are concerned, is showcased in the following ways: 1) Punditry texts; and 2) Community jargon and symbolic texts.

7.3.5.1. Punditry texts

This occurs when an Arsenal fan takes on the role of a pundit and thus shares his/her opinion on player on-field performances using various player performance quality indicators. In chapter 5 of this thesis for example, within the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Nottingham Forest 5-0 at home, a fan took on the role of a football pundit sharing his/her analysis about Arsenal's striker Gabriel Jesus in the following conversation, which lead to other fans who also took on the roles of football pundits in the same respect:

Comment

Fan 1: Gabriel Jesus might not be scoring goals as expected but his fluidity is helping Arsenal score more goals as a team.

Replies

Fan 2: "His fluidity is helping..." helping is an understatement. He made three assists in a game that's outrageous.

Fan 3: He is a second striker I believe, same as Podolski, he operates like a fox in the box

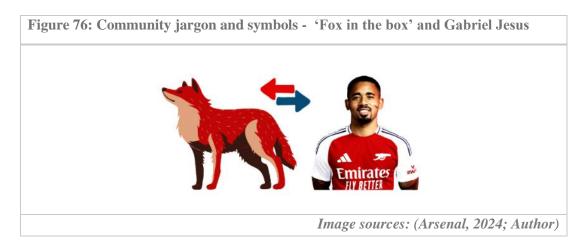
Fan 4: Guys he is not a proper number 9, He likes to Play false 9.

Fan 5: Exactly that, here in Brazil he always played as a winger.

Source: IJ 1

Lucas Podolski is a former Arsenal striker from Germany who played as a striker who as Fan 3 subjectively notes is known as a 'fox in the box' (see figure 76). This is football community jargon used to symbolise a striker who connivingly takes on the role of a fox and thus, he/she is tricky to defend against because he/she is often quietly hiding in the opponent's defensive area, waiting to pounce on any opportunity to score a goal. Additionally, 'a number 9 striker or a false 9' is football community jargon for a striker who plays the position of a striker whose main role is to score goals whilst assisting other players to score goals. Fan 1 perceives Gabriel Jesus, as 'fluid' to symbolise that he moves past opponents with ease, and seamlessly positions himself in areas that help the team score goals. This can be seen as an aspect of a top-quality player who is part of Arsenal's brand. The small quarrelsome discussion amongst fans

replying may seem negative, however, it is actually positive. This is because of Gabriel Jesus' versatility, there are varying opinions from Fan 3, 4 and 5 with regard to identifying which position suits the player.



The above finding concurs with Kozinets (2020) who notes that "the adoption of new identities, expressed through role modelling and play acting, adopting new fashions, attempting new social positions (such as influencer or activist), sometimes through aggression, and often in a dynamic manner, as if trying on new identities were a stylistic matter" (p. 134). It also extends his assertion by adding the role of a football pundit as a new identity, expressed through role modelling.

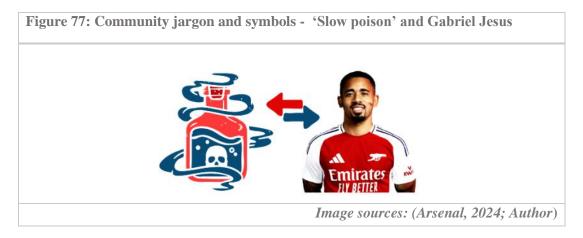
7.3.5.2. Community jargon and symbolic texts

This occurs when an Arsenal fan uses jargon and symbolic texts, which involves language and texts that are synonymous to the community, to share his/her opinion on player on-field performances with regard to quality. For example, in the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Aston Villa 2-1, a fan said, 'Crazy when we recall where we were when Arsene left. Emery, Ljungberg and the first two seasons of Arteta. Now it is totally a different team. No more soft boys, no more crying for referee, stronger set piece defence, more organised, more energy from each player through the whole game, old players out, young players developed from previous seasons flourish now, smart transfer signing...and more importantly...the fans are back. No toxic atmosphere at all.' Here, the fan offers an analysis of the team's progress from 2018, when Arsenal's former manager Arsene Wenger left the club. He/she uses certain football community jargon to showcase his/her high-quality indicators of the

Arsenal team, which is part of the Arsenal brand in terms of the quality of their onfield performances:

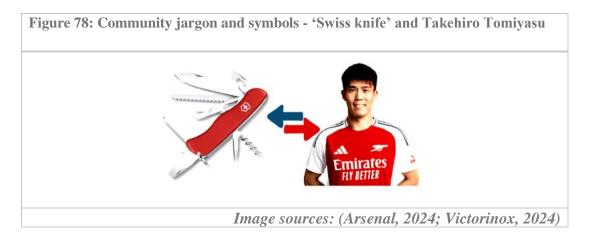
- a. 'No more soft boys'—This is used to express that current Arsenal players managed by Mikel Arteta are not physically weak in comparison to some players of the past who often appealed to the referee for foul play against them whenever they entered fair physical duels with opposition players on the field.
- b. 'Stronger set piece defence'—In the football community, a set piece is a rehearsed scoring opportunity from a free kick, corner kick, throw-in, and penalty. Thus, a 'stronger set piece defence' is one that strongly defends against a scoring opportunity from a set-piece. Additionally, the word set-piece stems from theatrical and military use where a segment of play has a particular effect or purpose, and an engagement where the strategies and moves of an army are pre-planned and methodically executed.

In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Nottingham Forest 5-0, one fan said, 'Gabriel Jesus is a slow poison distributor when he gets the ball he can score.' At first, this may seem like negative perceived quality because, Gabriel Jesus, who is a part of the Arsenal brand is being viewed as a 'slow poison' distributor or passer of the ball by the fan (see figure 77). In this regard, the term 'slow poison' holds negative connotations because of its gradual harmful effects. However, the fan is trying to symbolise that Gabriel Jesus is actually a top-quality player who is a threat to opponents because like slow poison, he gradually defeats his opponents while being deceivingly difficult to detect.



In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Liverpool 3-2 at home a fan said, 'What a show of character and grit from the team. I want to appreciate a player who

has impressed immensely, Takehiro Tomiyasu, elite, elite performance from him, the guy is just elite, elite mentality, Arsenal's very own Swiss knife. This is a team we can all be proud of. COYG!' In a similar way to the previous fan, the fan here shares his/her sentiments about the team noting that they showed character and grit in their victory against Liverpool. Additionally, he/she notes that Takehiro Tomiyasu, the team's Japanese defender is Arsenal's very own 'Swiss knife' in his/her description of the player's elite performance. In this case the term 'Swiss knife' is used to symbolise Takehiro Tomiyasu's versatility as a player who can play in a number of positions on the field (see figure 78). Thus, his versatility is similar to that of a Swiss army knife, which is a tool often used for many functions such as screw driving, can opening, precision cutting etc.



The above findings confirm Kozinets (2020) assertion that part of netnography's cultural focus is the use of new language and symbols, such as novel words, acronyms, memes, fonts, or emojis, which may be developed solely for online use, or mirrored online.

7.2.6. Perceived Quality - AFTV

With regard to Question 1 of this study, perceived quality within AFTV where post-match interviews are concerned, is showcased in the following way: 1) Punditry texts; and 2) Player performances and community jargon.

7.3.6.1. Punditry texts

This occurs when an Arsenal fan takes on the role of a pundit and thus shares his/her opinion on player and team on-field performances using various player and

performance quality indicators. For example, in Turkish's post-match interview where Arsenal drew 1-1 with Southampton away from home, a few fans shared their sentiments. One fan said, 'Our players looked tired today, and we didn't finish our chances in the 1st half.' For this fan, low-quality indicators with regard to the team's on-field performances are: 1) the team's tiredness; and 2) lack of being clinical with goal scoring chances created. Another fan said, 'This was coming, our football hasn't been anywhere near as fluid in games and today our luck ran out, albeit we missed great chances today that's frustrating.' For this fan, key low-quality indicators of the team's on-field performances are: 1) lack of 'fluid' or positive un-interrupted passages of football; and 2) missed opportunities to score goals when the team is at the opponent's defensive area. In the same post-match interview another fan said, 'We've been poor lately in second half of games and look shattered... poor passes, no hold up plays or creativity. 'For this fan, key low-quality indicators concerning the team's onfield performances are: 1) poor passes by the team's players; 2) no 'hold up' plays from the striker, which is football community jargon to symbolise a situation where the striker does not hold the ball enough to invite attacking midfielders into the attack; and 3) no creative attacks for goal scoring opportunities.

7.3.6.2. Community jargon and symbolic text

This occurs when an Arsenal fan uses jargon and symbolic texts, which involves language and texts that are synonymous to the community, to share their opinion on player on-field performances with regard to quality. For example, in Robbie's postmatch interview where Arsenal defeated Brentford 3-0 away from home, one fan said, 'Nice kick about with the boys.' In UK football culture, this is jargon used to symbolise that playing against the opponents was extremely easy, in that it felt like a casual game of friends at a local park (see figure 79). Additionally, the fan here perceives the Arsenal team which is part of the Arsenal brand as a team of high quality so much so, that it makes winning against the opponents look relaxed, like a 'nice kick about with the boys.' Moreover, this was a reply to Brentford's striker Ivan Toney's tweet, 'Just a kick about with the boys' after his team defeated Arsenal 2-0 in the opening game of the EPL season 2021/22.

Figure 79: Community jargon and symbols - 'Nice kickabout with the boys' and perceived quality



Images sources: (Arsenal, 2022; Rimoldi, 2020)

In Robbie's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Chelsea 1-0 away from home, some fans made remarks about the team's quality. One fan said, 'The way we attack in packs and with unrelenting pressure on their defence is simply awesome. We only lack more goals.' For the fan, a top-quality indicator of the Arsenal brand is a team that attacks in groups or as packs, which is a way of symbolising how wolves or lions attack their preys and while doing so applies 'unrelenting pressure' on the opposition's defence (see figure 80).

Figure 80: Community jargon and symbols - 'Attack in packs' and perceived quality



Image sources: (Arsenal, 2022; Media Drum Images, 2021)

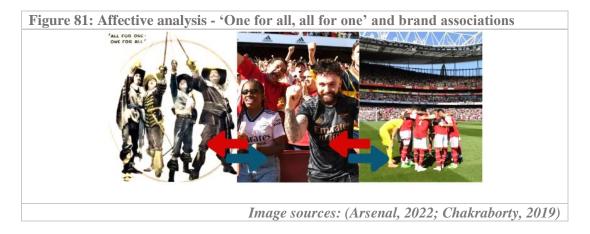
The above findings confirm Yashim (2023) assertion that cultures or groups of people within a community display behaviours, beliefs, and symbols that they accept, and are shared by communication and imitation.

7.2.7. Brand associations – Arsenal's official YouTube channel

With regard to Question 1 of this study, perceived quality within Arsenal's official YouTube channel where match highlights are concerned, is showcased in the following ways: 1) Affective analytical texts; 2) Historical narrative texts; 3) Experiential and bonding texts; and 4) Troller texts.

7.3.7.1. Affective analytical texts

This occurs when an Arsenal fan recognises emotional fan and team values such as togetherness, with regard to the team's on-field performances. Thus he/she associates the Arsenal brand with the value of togetherness. For example, in Arsenal's second game of the season where they defeated Leicester City 4-2 at home, William Saliba drew attention from some fans. In this regard, numerous Arsenal fans in the stadium, cheered him on after he unfortunately scored an own goal. This was because he was muddled as to which position Aaron Ramsdale, the team's goal keeper, was in, and passed the ball back to an empty net, which resulted in an own goal. Concerning this, one fan said, 'Was at the game. Proud of how the fans supported Saliba after his mix up with Ramsdale. Cheered every header, tackle and pass he made for the rest of the game. That's what fans do. Respect.' And another said, 'My biggest takeaway from the game is fans clapping, trying to cheer up Saliba after his OG (Own Goal)... It's incredible how far we have come together with Mikel at the wheel. One for all, all for one COYG. 'Usually, in football, when a player scores an own goal, it leaves a subdued mood within the team's fanbase. However, William Saliba was spurred on by Arsenal fans in the stadium. Here, the Arsenal brand seems to be associated with the phrase 'united club and united fans.' Indeed, as depicted, there is a fan who ended his/her comment with 'One for all, all for one,' which can be linked to Alexander Dumas' novel, The Three Musketeers (see figure 81). In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Fulham 2-1 at home, a fan said, 'I've not seen such zeal, passion and desire in the Arsenal team for so long. Onwards and upwards!' From a brand equity viewpoint, the fan is associating the Arsenal brand with the following team qualities: 1) Zeal; 2) Passion; and 3) Desire.



7.3.7.2. Historical narrative texts

This occurs when an Arsenal fan shares historical memories of the Arsenal team and thus associates the Arsenal brand with past moments concerning the team's on-field performances. For example, in the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Leicester City 4-2 at home, Arsenal's past success, including their unbeaten EPL season in 2003/04, was reminisced by a fan who said, 'Would love to bring back the glory days where everyone would tune in to watch Arsenal v United. Superior football without the revolting price tags and egos.' Here, the Arsenal brand is being associated with the team's 'glory days' (see figure 82). This suggests that because Arsenal were experiencing on-field success, they generated positive brand association from some fans. In this sense, they are able to entice fond memories of an extremely successful era with regard to the team's on-field performances and intense club rivalries. In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Aston Villa 2-1 at home, there was a nostalgic comment from a fan. The fan said, 'Almost nostalgic to see Arsenal like this again, last 5 games have been fantastic.' This suggests that Arsenal's on field performance is causing a sentimental longing or wistful fondness for a historical era. This period being Arsenal's successful years, which includes the Invincibles era under Arsene Wenger, Arsenal's longest serving and most successful team manager, and players such as Theirry Henry, Dennis Berkamp, Sol Campbell, Robert Pires amongst others. In this light, in a game where Arsenal defeated Chelsea 2-1 away from home, one fan said, 'Haven't been this proud since our Invincibles. Thank you to the club Arteta, Edu and the players for this joy ".'



The above findings concur with Storch (2023) who notes that for sports teams and organisations, brands are built on the shoulders of legendary individuals such as sports players. Additionally, within sports teams and organisations, individuals' stories and

achievements encourage people, help form an identity, and create a brand. In relation to the above findings, Storch (2023) asserts that the past is arguably almost as integral as the present, as a team's brand identity is inextricably associated to the stories of its players, the failures and successes throughout their careers, and the historical narratives that unite them.

7.3.7.3. Experiential and bonding texts

This occurs when an Arsenal fan shares (and bonds with other fans over) his/her stadium experience and/or their opinion on how the stadium atmosphere was when he/she watched the match, thus associating the Arsenal brand with having a positive stadium atmosphere. In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Everton 4-0, a few fans shared their stadium experience as depicted in the following comment and replies:

Comment:

Fan 1: It was my first time ever at the Emirates tonight, and what a game it was ♥ We were amazing. COYG!

Replies:

Fan 2: Been there a couple of times. Awesome atmosphere!

Fan 3: Had mine not too long ago. The atmosphere was electric

Fan 4: Did you know that we are in South America raising money to be there supporting the Gunners?

Fan 5: Ha ha, I had my first visit to Highbury in 1976 to watch the likes of Liam Brady and Pat Rice! Still get the same buzz today. Welcome to Arsenal ²²

Source: IJ 1

This is a form of brand association for the Arsenal brand whereby, Arsenal is being linked with having a stadium that has an 'electric' (Fan 3) and 'awesome atmosphere' (Fan 2). Fan 5 even offers everyone a brief historical narrative of his/her stadium experience dating all the way back to 1976 (see figure 83). Additionally, to describe the stadium atmosphere, he/she uses the word 'buzz,' which is an informal way of describing excitement and energy. Thus, this fan is associating the Arsenal brand with having stadiums (Highbury and Emirates) that have excitement and energy.



The above findings concur with a study on sport stadium atmosphere by Uhrich and Benkenstein (2010) who found that the emotional dimensions of arousal and pleasure describe how sport spectators respond to the physical and social sport scene. Additionally, they found that excitement or enthusiasm were typical emotional responses to the stadium's environment. The above findings also extend the results of Uhrich and Benkenstein (2010) study in that, not only does sport stadium atmosphere entice emotional dimensions of arousal and pleasure but the sharing of a narrative (some comparative) based on past and new sport stadium experience, such as the one depicted by Fan 2, 3 and 5, which is a part of a shared emotional connection (in a sense of community). McMillan and Chavis (1986) assert that this is the commitment and belief that members have shared and will share history, common places, time together, and similar experiences. Moreover, in their study, Uhrich and Benkenstein (2010) acknowledged that stimuli springing from fan behaviour can refer to various factors linked with enthusiasm when the home team scores. Contrary to this, in this thesis, some findings suggest that stimuli springing from fan behaviour not only refer to various factors linked with enthusiasm when the home team scores as Uhrich and Benkenstein (2010) found, but when the home team (Arsenal) makes a mistake in their on-field performance. For example, in match highlights where Arsenal defeated Fulham 2-1 at home, a fan said, 'The fans in the stadium absolutely carried the team right after the mistake, they had the boys back, Emirates Stadium was unreal today.' From a brand equity perspective, the Arsenal brand is being associated with a positive stadium atmosphere despite a mistake from the team, especially when the fan notes that the 'Emirates was unreal.'

7.3.7.4. Troller texts

This occurs when fans of Arsenal's rivals share negative associations concerning the Arsenal brand in the spirit of jest, but instead showcases a deep hatred and jealousy towards the Arsenal brand thus becoming 'failed jest,' which un-sportingly makes light of the football club's narrow failure in its valiant effort to win the EPL title. For example, in the match highlights where Arsenal lost to Nottingham Forest 1-0 away from home, towards the end of the season, one rival fan said, 'Even in an outstanding season, Arsenal somehow managed to do an Arsenal.' Here, the fan is associating the Arsenal brand with 'constant failure' when their team edges towards victory. In this light, another rival fan said, 'Eight points clear and still conceded the title to a rampant City side. One of the greatest chokes in the history of the Premier League without a doubt. 'Here, the fan associates the Arsenal brand with 'choking' or one of the greatest failures in the history of the EPL because when they were eight points ahead of Manchester City, they failed to maintain momentum towards league victory. Such texts from fans of rival clubs unfortunately fail to acknowledge and understand the great difficulty of challenging for the EPL title especially, when it is against a competitor like Manchester City who have deep wells of un-comparable financial resources. Instead, these troller texts seem to emanate from of deep hatred and jealousy of Arsenal's progress as a football club under the team's manager, Mikel Arteta (See figure 84).

From figure 84, we can deduce that Arsenal's EPL point trajectory and league position have improved from season 2019/20 (56 points) to season 2023/24 (81 points) largely due to the appointing of Mikel Arteta as the team's manager in 2019. With regard to the team's on-field performance, this is a significant progress, which should rarely warrant troller texts, thus making such types of texts an anomaly. In chapter 2 of this thesis, Crockett (2024) notes that a social media troll is an individual who intentionally engages in inflammatory, disruptive, or offensive behaviour online to provoke emotional reactions and catalyse controversy. She adds that trolls seek attention and gain satisfaction from causing discord and upsetting others.

Figure 84: Arsenal's EPL point trajectory from EPL Season 2019/20 to 2023/24



Image source of Mikel Arteta: Arsenal (2024)

This study suggests that the above findings likely stem from the lack of tangible recognition for second and third place positions from the EPL, who apart from financial awards, do not award football clubs that finish second and/or third in their league any silver or bronze medals respectively. In turn, numerous EPL fans have gradually failed to recognise the hardship and sheer effort it takes for football clubs to finish second and/or third, because these clubs leave with nothing tangible in terms of silverware to show for their efforts unlike other elite competitions like Wimbledon. This is perhaps a recommendation for the EPL to introduce tangible symbols of excellence (silver and bronze medals) for clubs who finish second and third so as to create an atmosphere of support and recognition of hard work and effort by EPL fans.

7.2.8. Brand associations – AFTV

With regard to Question 1 of this study, perceived quality within AFTV where post-match interviews are concerned, is showcased in the following ways: 1) Away fan texts; 2) Troller texts; and 3) Emotional texts.

7.3.8.1. Away fan texts

This occurs when an Arsenal fan recognises the behaviour of fans who travel to watch the team play in matches away from their home stadium (away fans) as positive and thus associates the Arsenal brand with having away fans who display positive energy. For example, in Lee Judges' post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Crystal Palace 2-0 away from home, one fan made a remark about the energy from Arsenal

fans who travelled to Crystal Palace to watch the Arsenal team play (see figure 85). Here, the fan is associating the Arsenal brand with having fans who have 'Good energy.' In football, it is energetic home stadium support from fans that is usually noticeable, however, in this case the fan notices that the Arsenal fans who were at another team's stadium, were energetic. They are often known as 'away fans' who travel and watch their favourite football team play.



Though past research has focused on fan behaviour within home stadium atmospheres (Silva et al., 2021; Uhrich & Benkenstein, 2010), current research has not focused on fan behaviour away from home stadium atmosphere, or in the context of being in other stadiums specifically, opposition team stadiums. The above findings thus contribute to this void, suggesting that there is room for studies on 'away fan' behaviour and sports brands.

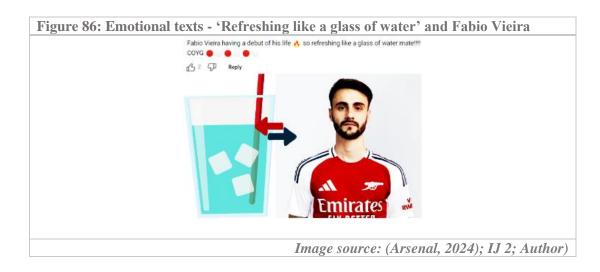
7.3.8.2. Troller texts

Similar to troller texts found in Arsenal's official YouTube channel, this occurs when fans of Arsenal's rivals share negative associations concerning the Arsenal brand in the spirit of jest, but instead showcases a deep hatred and jealousy towards the Arsenal brand thus becoming 'failed jest,' which un-sportingly makes light of the football club's narrow failure in its valiant effort to win the EPL title. For example, when Arsenal lost 3-1 to Manchester United away from home, a rival fan who supports Manchester United said, 'Congrats on dominating the game, we'll take the points.' Here, the fan acknowledges that Arsenal dominated the game but failed to capitalise on their goal scoring chances whereas Manchester United who were pinned to their half of the field by Arsenal for most of the game took full advantage of their goal scoring opportunities. In the end, Arsenal finished the EPL season in second place with 81 points, whereas Manchester United finished in third place with 75 points, thus

showing that the troller text, which aims at associating the Arsenal brand with the lack of finishing goal scoring opportunities did not paint a full picture of the Arsenal team's overall on-field performance for the season. Similar to the troller texts within Arsenal's official YouTube channel towards the end of the EPL season, such texts fail to recognise and understand the great effort it takes to even come close to winning the EPL title especially when the team competes against a rival like Manchester City who have a bottomless well of financial resources. Instead, these troller texts, are a form of deep hatred and jealousy of Arsenal's progress as a football club since the team's manager Mikel Arteta was recruited.

7.3.8.3. Emotional texts

This occurs when an Arsenal fan shares sentiments with regard to how the team made him/her feel with its on-field performance. For example, in Lee Judges' post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Leicester City 4-2 at home, one fan showcased his/her happiness with the Arsenal brand while eagerly anticipating Lee Judges' post-match interview. The fan said, 'Been waiting, I'm so happy right now.' Here the fan associates the feeling of happiness with the Arsenal brand through the team's on-filed performances. In Robbie's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Brentford 3-0 away from home, one fan shared his/her remarks about Fabio Vieira, Arsenal's young Portuguese midfielder (see figure 86). Here, the fan is associating the feeling of being refreshed 'like a glass of water' to Fabio Vieira's on-field performance during the player's debut or first game as an Arsenal player. Additionally, Fabio Vieira scored an excellent goal from a long-range effort towards goal.



In Kelechi's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Aston Villa 4-2 away from home, Kelechi was as jovial and excited as he often is. In this regard, one fan said 'Coming from Africa Kelechi is the typical example of a proper supporter. I always feel happy when I see him.' Here, the fan associates a feeling of happiness to Kelechi, who plays an integral part within the AFTV community (see figure 87).



In Belgium's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Bournemouth 3-2, one fan said, 'Belgium is so unique in a good way, the way we came back was amazing, the feeling is untouched and utterly beautiful.' This is a form of brand association whereby, the Arsenal team, which is part of the Arsenal brand is associated with an 'untouched' and 'beautiful' feeling because of how the team came back from 2-0 to make it 3-2 in dramatic fashion. The above findings concur with Brogi (2014) who refers to SMBCs as brand communities within computer-mediated environments where members interact with each other exchanging and sharing information and emotions. Additionally, the findings also coincide with various scholars who have noted that fans join sport SMBCs for various reasons. These include functional value (perceived utility), emotional value (feelings aroused from perceived utility), epistemic value (knowledge about the brand), entertainment value (enjoyable content), bonding value (feelings of community and connection), and experience sharing (Kaur et al., 2018; Krzyżowski & Strzelecki, 2022; Santos et al., 2022; Chen & Huang, 2022; Sturm, 2020). Furthermore, the findings above align themselves to an assertion by Kozinets (2021) who views online communities as consumer tribes and explains that these consumer tribes are not limited to fan clubs, conventions, in-store, and in-home meetings, by any means. They extend themselves into virtual spaces through the use

of internet mediated technology. He adds that they have a structure and followers are increasingly mediated by technology. Thus, their communication expresses information and emotion through pictures and words. In this regard, Marion (2022) explains that a brand is the idea or image consumers have in their mind when thinking about specific products, services, and activities of a company, in both a practical and emotional way. She adds that this combination of practical and emotional cues occurs when consumers are exposed to the name, logo and visual identity of a brand. Moreover, if harnessed correctly by Arsenal's brand managers in the club's digital marketing strategies, the above findings can help the club achieve an extent of brand resonance as Yağız and Özer (2022) who focused on examining the relationships between brand knowledge, brand responses and brand resonance in sports leagues within the scope of consumer-based brand equity note. Their study found that brand associations play a crucial role for a brand to gain positive responses and resonance with fans of Turkish top tier league, the Super League. Additionally, their study found that obtaining cognitive responses such as brand credibility and affective responses such as emotional feelings from consumers can increase the degree of brand resonance.

7.3. Q2 How is the brand equity of a football club showcased comparatively with regard to football official and Fan TV YouTube channels?

7.3.1. Comparative analysis of the brand equity texts

From table 20, we can deduce that a key similarity between both Arsenal's official YouTube channel and AFTV is that they both have online fan texts which showcase:

1) brand loyalty; 2) brand awareness; 3) perceived quality; and 4) brand associations. Within these dimensions, the texts showcased by fans in both channels are: 1) Brand loyalty—ritual texts, conscious brand loyalty texts, and subconscious brand loyalty texts; 2) Brand awareness—punditry texts and rival fan texts; 3) Perceived quality—punditry texts, and community jargon and symbolic texts; and 4) Brand association—troller texts. Additionally, within both YouTube channels the texts that are unique to each YouTube channel are: 1) Brand loyalty—non-player brand influencer texts (only in AFTV); and 3) Brand associations—affective analytical texts, historical narrative texts, stadium experience texts (only in Arsenal's official YouTube channel), away fan texts

and emotional texts (only in AFTV). The main reason for this result lies in the nature of the most viewed content within Arsenal's official YouTube channel, which are match highlights, and post-match interviews on AFTV as depicted in table 21. Based on the aforementioned, and both table 20 and 21, in the sports context as discussed in the literature review, Thompson et al. (2018) found that brand engagement within sport SMBCs were used by firms to develop brand loyalty and brand association in the pursuit of long-term marketing goals. In this regard, brand loyalty and brand association texts were found to exist within Arsenal's official YouTube channel, which is a Sport SMBC brand engagement endeavour by the football club.

Table 20: Brand equity dime	ensions within Arsenal's offic	cial YouTube channel and	
Brand equity dimensions	Arsenal's official YouTube channel	AFTV	
	Match highlights	Post-match interviews	
Brand loyalty	Showcased in both channels		
Ritual texts	✓	\checkmark	
Conscious brand loyalty texts	✓	✓	
Subconscious brand loyalty texts	✓	✓	
Non-player brand influencer texts	×	✓	
Brand awareness	Showcased in both channels		
Punditry texts	\checkmark	\checkmark	
Rival fan texts	✓	\checkmark	
Non-player brand influencer texts	×	✓	
Perceived quality	Showcased in both channels		
Punditry texts	✓	\checkmark	
Community jargon and symbolic texts	✓	✓	
Brand associations	Showcased in both channels		
Affective analytical texts	✓	×	
Historical narrative texts	✓	×	
Experiential and bonding texts	✓	×	
Troller texts	✓	\checkmark	
Away fan texts	X	✓	
Emotional texts	×	✓	

In the literature review, within the context of other industries: in their study on the effect of customer social participation in hotel SMBCs on consumer-based brand equity and advocacy, Abdel-Aty and Deraz (2022) found that there are moderate positive effects of consumer social participation on various brand equity dimensions, namely brand image, brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand association. In this light, fan social participation within Arsenal's official YouTube channel displayed brand loyalty, brand awareness, and perceived quality texts.

Table 21: Difference between the nature of match highlights and post-match interviews			
Most viewed content	Match highlights	Post-match interviews	
Online platform	Arsenal's official YouTube channel	AFTV	
Online platform type	Sport SMBC	User SMBC	
	Part of FGC (Firm-generated content) Exclusive to Arsenal	Part of UGC (Usergenerated content) Strongly established and grown by AFTV, but not exclusive to AFTV	
Nature	Showcased after the match Showcases short clips of players, managers, fans, stadium atmosphere and various aspects of the team's on-field performances including goals	Showcased after the match Showcases match opinions of well-known, highly respected and regular members of: 1) AFTV's community; 2) up and coming regular members of AFTV's community; and 3) football fans from different walks of life	

Bashir et al. (2020), in their study on the impact of brand community participation on brand equity dimensions in the luxury apparel industry, found that participation in online brand communities has a significant impact on three brand equity dimensions namely: brand awareness, brand association, and perceived quality. In relation to this finding, brand awareness, brand association, and perceived quality texts were showcased within Arsenal's official YouTube channel. Additionally, there is extant literature with regard to brand equity and user SMBCs such as AFTV. In this context, the findings of this study contribute to this gap by finding that brand equity dimensions (brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand associations) exist

within AFTV (a UGC YouTube channel) as depicted in table 20. Luca (2015) observes that nearly every industry is affected by UGC. Every online interaction has a social element to it, and every type of media is incorporating, competing with, or being replaced by UGC. Social media platforms such as YouTube enable users to engage with each other through the creating and disseminating of content. The common thread across these platforms is that they have UGC. To recapitulate, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) explain that UGC is the sum of all ways in which people utilise social media. The term, which gained broad fame in 2005, is frequently applied to describe the various forms of media content that are publicly available and created by end-users. This includes texts, data, information, and media that is showcased to others in a useful or entertaining manner. This content is captured and streamed over social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, TikTok etc. (Krumm et al., 2008; Santos, 2022; Tu et al., 2021). On the other hand official SMBCs are formed by firms to share brand-related FGC with consumers on social media. They produce and share FGC that is professionally designed and managed by a firm's marketing department and have become a popular tool, empowering brands to use various content types to show consumers sharable, informative, and comment-worthy information (Colicev et al., 2019; Santiago et al., 2022).

Santos (2022) notes that the spread of social media paves the way for the normality of developing self-created content, which significantly evades editorship and is commonly available. For example, or in the case of this study, UGC from AFTV, which does not go through the scrutiny of Arsenal's social media executives and is widely available on social media. In their study on the effect of FGC and UGC evaluation on customer-based brand equity of a cosmetics brand, Hermaren and Achyar (2018) found that FGC has a positive and significant impact on brand association/awareness, perceived quality and brand loyalty. On the other hand, UGC has a significant effect only on brand awareness/association and perceived quality. Sandunima and Jayasuriya (2024) studied the impact of FGC and UGC on customer purchasing intentions in a fashion industry and found that both FGC and UGC for marketing communication have significant effects on consumer purchase intentions. However, FGC displays a stronger influence on customer purchase intentions. Additionally, their research revealed that consumers showcase a high degree of receptiveness to both FGC and UGC on social media platforms. In this light Arsenal

fans were both receptive to FGC from Arsenal's official YouTube channel and UGC from AFTV. In their article on sports and UGC strategies, Reuters (2025) note that UGC is a suitable strategy for brands because of its ease of production since many consumers have a video-capable smartphone to hand. Additionally, there is a psychological dimension, where individuals want to contribute to a discussion and share their side of a story. This study attests to this, however fans from both Arsenal's official YouTube channel (which produces FGC) and AFTV (which produces UGC) loved sharing their side of the story concerning Arsenal matches. Thus suggesting that both FGC and UGC have psychological elements.

7.3.2. Positive and negative brand equity

In the literature review, some scholars concur that brand engagement within official SMBCs has a helpful impact on brand value. From their study on the impact of social value, content value, and brand equity in SMBCs, Faisal et al. (2022) found that brand engagement within official SMBCs has a positive impact on brand equity. Likewise, Cheung et al. (2020) in their study on exploring synergetic effects of social-media communication and distribution strategy on consumer-based brand equity, found that firm created social-media brand communication and distribution intensity are key factors influencing consumer-based brand equity. Likewise, Kumar (2021), in a study on customer brand engagement in Facebook brand communities, found that there exists a link between brand community engagement and brand equity. Moreover, within the literature review, a number of authors have acknowledged that brand engagement within official SMBCs has had a positive impact on purchase intention, brand loyalty, brand engagement relationships, and multi-dimensions of brand value. To a degree the findings in this study specifically displayed or summarised in table 20, illustrate that brand equity is showcased within Arsenal's official YouTube channel, an official SMBC, in the form of various brand equity dimension texts (brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand associations). In addition, negative brand equity was showcased in the form of troller texts, which Crockett (2024) notes are formed by an individual who intentionally participates in inflammatory, disruptive, or offensive activities online to: 1) incite emotional reactions; 2) catalyse controversy; 3) seek attention; and 4) gain satisfaction from causing discord and upsetting others.

Contrary to the positive light that official SMBCs have been painted in with regard to brand value, in the literature review, user SMBCs have been portrayed in a different light. In sport, the marginalisation of fans' voices within the dominant mainstream media plays a crucial role in the formation of some football user SMBCs. They are thus viewed as democratic spaces free of firm control where fans can freely discuss football club matters on social media (Woods & Ludvigsen, 2022). Andrews and Ritzer (2018) assert that the voices of sports fans (individual sports social media prosumers) have often been suppressed by what they call the 'Leviathans' (corporate sports entities) using established brand value within social media settings.

Woods and Ludvigsen (2022) contend that Fan TV YouTube channels (user SMBCs) are highly noteworthy in enabling football fans to voice their perceptions on club matters, transfer speculations, game-play, and provide tactical analyses with pre-game and post-game reactions. They add, user SMBCs offer fans a chance to partake in a football club's decision making processes such as a manager's team selection, and other facets of club management (Healy & McDonagh, 2013). Nevertheless, fan engagement in user SMBCs has been discussed in relation to resistance, which can be attributed to the following reasons: 1) Exploitative culture; 2) Incongruence of firm and fan's goals; 3) Firm and ideological mis-match; and 4) Negative brand relations. In contrast to the above, findings in this study, specifically displayed or summarised in table 20, suggest that positive brand equity is showcased within AFTV, a user SMBC, in the form of various brand equity dimension texts (brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand associations). Similar to Arsenal's official YouTube channel, negative brand equity was showcased in the form of troller texts, which Crockett (2024) notes are formed by an individual who purposely takes part in inflammatory, disruptive, or offensive activities online to: 1) incite emotional reactions; 2) catalyse controversy; 3) seek attention; and 4) gain satisfaction from causing discord and upsetting others. In this light, table 22 illustrates negative brand engagement of user SMBCs as discussed in the literature review, in relation to this study's brand equity findings within AFTV, a user SMBC.

From table 22, we can deduce that this study's findings on AFTV, a user SMBC is to a large extent contrary to negative brand engagement of user SMBCs as depicted in the literature review. AFTV, which is autonomous does not have: 1) triggers of negative brand engagement within SMBCs; 2) forms of negative brand engagement;

and 3) threats (outcomes) of negative brand engagement. In this regard, this study suggests that AFTV is not a threat to Arsenal's brand equity and thus does not warrant Arsenal to strategically restrict AFTV from using its brand name. For example, when the club requested AFTV to withdraw the name 'Arsenal' from its brand-related content over concerns about its negativity and harm to the Arsenal brand thus causing Arsenal Fan TV at the time to change its name to AFTV (Smith, 2018; Storer, 2018).

Table 22: Negative brand engagement of user SMBCs in relation to brand equity findings within AFTV			
Attributes	Description	Found in AFTV (Yes or No)	
Autonomy	User SMBCs are democratic spaces free of a firm's control	Yes	
	Fans can freely deliberate on football club issues on social media	Yes	
Triggers of negative brand engagement within user SMBCs	Exploitative corporate culture	No	
	Incongruence of firm and fans' goals	No	
	Firm and fan ideological mismatch	No	
	Negative brand relations apart from troller texts, which exist in both Arsenal's official YouTube channel and AFTV	No	
Forms of negative	Protesting using hashtags	No	
brand engagement within user SMBCs	Forming anti-brand communities	No	
	Twisting sponsor brand names	No	
	Negative brand anthropomorphism	No	
	Forming anti-brand communities	No	
Threats (outcomes) of negative brand engagement	Rise in volume and visibility of negative brand emotions	No	
	Brand damage	No	
	Negative impact on brand equity	No	

7.4. Q3 How do various football fan segments within football official and Fan TV YouTube channels showcase brand equity of a football club?

In the literature review, Aaker (1991) contends that segmentation is an overt decision to divide customers into segments based on variables such as age, geographic location, benefits sought, and gender for appropriate brand engagement. Mousavi and Roper (2023) note that it is imperative to undertake segmentation when investigating online brand communities so as to understand the impact of members' participation in these communities. In this regard, within the literature review, this study discussed Mullin et al. (2014) fan segmentation characteristics. These characteristics are categorised as lifestyle, socio-demographics, product usage, and benefits to customers. Lastly, the following are Arsenal fan segments: 1) Arsenal efangelists; 2) Arsenal utilitarian fans; 3) Arsenal core fans; 4) Arsenal spectators; 5) Arsenal's Kelechi brigade; and 5) Arsenal's Jamaican 'fambo.'

7.4.1. Arsenal efangelists

Behavioural support has been used to segment fans by Chiu et al. (2019) who found that Efangelists are fans who showcase active behavioural support and display high degrees of advocacy. In so doing they promote the brand and all positive associations that come with it to individuals who have so far not acknowledged 'the wonder of it,' as such, they serve as a strong marketing tool for enticing potential fans. In this regard, within AFTV, this study found that certain brand loyalty texts from fans showcased efangelistic behavioural support. For example, in Kelechi's post-match interview where Arsenal lost 3-1 to Manchester City at home, he urged the fans to stop having a 'doom and gloom' attitude and to keep supporting the team regardless of the team's heavy defeat at home. In relation to this, one fan said, 'This is why I love Kelechi so much. He is absolutely right. This is the time to stick together. People are just moaning Arteta has not done this, has not done that, start him, start her start this.' Here, the fan is efangelising to fellow Arsenal fans who adopted a 'doom and gloom' attitude towards the team after their heavy defeat to Manchester City. In the same post-match interview another fan said, 'Kelechi is right...we as fans need to stand behind the team... We have not come this far to fail. We played well in the first half and we can still win this league.' Here, the fan consciously displays loyalty to the Arsenal brand

and efangelistic behavioural support by acknowledging and re-emphasising that Kelechi is right in urging fans to 'stand behind the team' despite the heavy home defeat while re-assuring fellow Arsenal fans can 'still win' the EPL title.

7.4.2. Arsenal utilitarian fans

Social media motivation has been used to segment fans into a group known as a multifaceted fan segment. This finding emerged from a study by Fischer (2019) on market segmentation in the context of social media usage. Multifaceted social media users are die-hard fans and are highly motivated to use social media for economic (ticket prices, betting etc.), information and connection purposes. In this study, some brand equity texts showcased multifaceted fan segment behaviour. For example, in the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Leicester City 4-2 at home, one fan shared his/her remarks. The fan said, 'As true Arsenal fans, we watch the match live and still rush to watch the highlights \(\beta \bigsim \bigsim \). This ritual text suggests that for the fan, something true Arsenal fans do is watch the full game and then watch the highlights of the same game later on Arsenal's official YouTube channel. For this multifaceted fan, he/she is highly enticed to use Arsenal's official YouTube channel for information in the form of match highlights. Additionally, there was a fan who replied to the ritual text saying, '@ @ that's how we love Arsenal .' Here, the fan is showcasing multifaceted fan segment behaviour by using Arsenal's YouTube channel with regard to match highlights to love (or connect with) Arsenal.

7.4.3. Arsenal core fans

In their research on market segmentation of college football fans in America, Rascher et al. (2021) identified core football fans who care primarily about the quality of the team and the football product, but do not care about logistics, customer service, promotions, etc.). In this regard, this study found particular brand equity texts within both Arsenal's YouTube channel and AFTV that display the characteristics of core fans. Specifically, these fans adopted the roles of pundits and thus shared punditry texts as a way of showcasing perceived quality. For example, in the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Chelsea 1-0 away from home, there was support for the team's style of football. One fan said, 'That move under pressure, working the ball from the back with one touch quick passes to then create a scoring chance...that was the main

"Ooh" moment for me ...pure class, this is Arteta Ball at its finest \(\cdot \) \(\cdo

 \heartsuit \r coyg.' Here, the use of the word 'pure class' is used again to showcase the fan's perception of Arsenal's high-quality passages of football. The above thus concurs which Rascher et al. (2021) who identified core football fans as fans who care primarily about the quality of the team and the football product.

7.4.4. Arsenal spectators

In the literature review, Finch et al. (2022) assert that spectators in the context of fan segmentation are fans who are on the verge of becoming extremely loyal fans but still not personally connected to the club and are often referred to as tipping point, pros, old school, connected, next-gen, homers, live gamers, big-screen segment and lineitem fans. Additionally, they advocate that football clubs should focus on converting spectators to devoted fans through marketing plans that encourage emotional purchases, relationships with similar consumers, and feelings of belongingness to the club. In this regard, some rival fan texts showcasing brand awareness within Arsenal's official YouTube channel depicted fans with spectator behaviour in the context of fan segmentation. For example, in the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Crystal Palace 2-0 away from home, an Olympique de Marseille fan showed support for William Saliba, Arsenal's French defender. The fan said, 'We had him last year at Olympique de Marseille. Saliba is a SALIBEAST he was the best player of OM (Olympique de Marseille) the whole of last year and played very well with Equipe de France, the national team in 2022. Enjoy it Arsenal fans and thank-you for the nice relations between Marseille and Arsenal's boards...' Here, William Saliba's transfer to Arsenal from his loan spell at Olympique de Marseille drew attention from this fan. Additionally, over the years Arsenal has been known to recruit a large number of French players. For example, Thierry Henry, Patrick Viera, Emmanuel Petit, Robert

Pires etc. Even Arsene Wenger, Arsenal's longest serving manager, hails from Duttlenheim, France. Thus, Arsenal's French connection may have generated a large Arsenal fan base in France making the Olympique de Marseille fan an Arsenal spectator who as Finch et al. (2022) puts it, could be at the tipping point of being a loyal Arsenal fan despite his/her non-personal connection to the Arsenal brand.

In the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Crystal Palace 2-0, a Barcelona fan said, 'Barca fan here, love to see Arsenal doing great again. Hope they can keep this form against big teams. Best of luck for the season. 'Barcelona and Arsenal are known for playing the famous 'Tiki taka' brand of football over the years. This is a football philosophy influenced by the 'Total football' style of football, which was pioneered by Barcelona's former football player and coach Johan Cruyff. It involves playing positive forward-thinking football with neat and creative passing patterns, which according to a large number of football fans, creates entertaining and fun football to watch. This football philosophy seems to have created a connection between Arsenal and the Barcelona fan who can also be viewed as a spectator fan at the tipping point of being a loyal Arsenal fan. Similarly, in the match highlights where Arsenal defeated Leicester City 4-2, an Ajax Amsterdam fan said, 'As an Ajax fan myself, I really enjoy seeing this Arsenal play. This is the Arsenal we've been waiting for so long. Hope they can keep this up and maybe win the title!' Like Barcelona, Ajax Amsterdam, a football club from Holland, play a similar brand of football like Arsenal, the 'Total style' of football. It is also worth noting that Johan Cruyff, an influential figure of the tiki-taka style of football, coached and played for both Barcelona and Ajax. Thus, through this connection, the Ajax Amsterdam fan can be viewed as an Arsenal spectator who is also at the tipping point of being an Arsenal fan.

7.4.5. Arsenal's Kelechi brigade

In the literature review, Duffy (2020) refers to social media influencers as a subset of digital content creators defined by their large online following, distinctive brand persona, and patterned association with commercial sponsors. In this sense, Arsenal's Kelechi brigade is a fan segment consisting of fans within AFTV, who showcased brand equity texts based on their connection to Kelechi. In Kelechi's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Nottingham Forest 5-0 at home, Kelechi's ritual of often dancing and playing Nigerian afro-pop music before his interview, which leads

to fans around him jovially joining him, was chiefly noticed by a fan who said, 'For so many years we've ridden the rollercoaster with Kelechi and his post-match music. It's incredible, what a gooner. Big up.' Here the fan is not intentionally showcasing his loyalty to the Arsenal brand through the years, but is subconsciously doing so by sharing that he/she has been on a journey following Arsenal with Kelechi through the highs and lows of supporting Arsenal.

Additionally, regarding Kelechi's popularity within the AFTV community, one fan said, 'After the game I always come to watch Kelechi's reactions herein.' Here, the fan subconsciously showcases his/her connection to AFTV and the Arsenal brand by ritually viewing Kelechi's post-match interviews on AFTV after every Arsenal game. In Kelechi's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Tottenham Hotspurs 3-1 at home, one fan shared his/her remarks about Kelechi by saying, 'Win or Lose, I just can't wait for Kelechi. He is always full of joy. POSITIVE VIBES ALWAYS. 'Here, the fan is showcasing his/her connection to the team, which is part of the Arsenal brand by strongly anticipating Kelechi's post-match interviews whether the team wins or loses. Similarly, in Kelechi's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Chelsea 3-1 at home, Kelechi was full of lively energy as he often has during his interview. In this regard one fan said, 'Kelechi's fan cam is the one I'm always looking forward to. Big up to him! Gunners 4 life. 'Here, the fan is also showcasing his/her connection to the Arsenal brand through a strong anticipation for Kelechi's post-match interviews. Culturally, in Kelechi's post-match interview where Arsenal drew 3-3 with Southampton at home, one fan was humoured by Kelechi's reaction to the result saying, 'Kelechi...Odogwu...You cracked me up.' Here, the fan is aware that Kelechi is Nigerian and in the Nigerian language of Igbo he/she addresses Kelechi as an 'Odogwu,' which refers to someone held in high esteem, a hero and/or a well-respected person who has achieved something noteworthy. Thus for the fan, Kelechi is an Odogwu within the AFTV community. On the cultural note, in Kelechi's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated Aston Villa 4-2 away from home, Kelechi was as jovial and excitable as he often is. In this regard, one fan said 'Coming from Africa Kelechi is the typical example of a proper supporter. I always feel happy when I see him. 'Here, the fan associates a feeling of happiness to Kelechi. Additionally, for this fan, Kelechi's African roots are relatable because he/she is also an African Arsenal

fan. For him/her, Kelechi symbolises the archetypal Arsenal fan from Africa because of his energy and positive vibes.

7.4.6. Arsenal's Jamaican 'fambo'

These are Arsenal fans who display brand equity texts depicting their Jamaican heritage within AFTV. For example, in Helen's post-match interview for the match where Arsenal defeated Fulham 2-1 at home, Robbie interviewed Helen and noted that he loved that she wore Arsenal's Jamaican inspired training jersey/pre-match kit. In this regard, one fan said, 'I love her in the kit as well.' Here, the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand through Helen's wearing of Arsenal's Jamaican inspired training jersey. Another fan said, 'Helen knows the game and she knows the Jamaican Arsenal FC kit is sickI want to buy 2 right now where in Jamaica JM can I buy one fambo.' Here, the fan is impressed with the Jamaican inspired training jersey and uses the word 'sick' to describe it, which is an informal way of saying it is amazing. Additionally, he/she is willing to purchase two of the jerseys and is asking where he/she can buy one in Jamaica. In a sports related study, Dias et al. (2022) found that commitment between supporters and their clubs on SMBCs has a positive influence on their relationship in terms of purchase and reference intention. Culturally, the fan uses the word 'fambo,' which in Jamaican patois means 'family.'

In Kelechi's post-match interview where Arsenal defeated their local North London rivals Tottenham Hotspurs 3-1 at home, Robbie, who was interviewing him noted that it was Nigeria's independence day. In this light, a Jamaican fan sent his/her best wishes to Nigerian Arsenal fans. The fan said, 'Happy independence day to Nigeria NG, as a Jamaican JM respect to the motherland.' Here the Jamaican fan said, 'Respect to the mother land' in this case Africa where numerous Jamaican ancestors hailed from, due to the tragic Trans-Atlantic slave trade that peaked in the 18th century.

7.5. Q4 How do digital data traces within football official and Fan TV YouTube channels showcase new and interrelated brand equity dimensions?

7.5.1. New brand equity dimensions

The theoretical contribution of this study is based on Aaker (1991) concept of brand equity. He explains that "brand equity is a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol, that add to or subtract from the value provided by a

product or service to a firm and/or to that firm's customers" (p. 27). For him, the assets and liabilities on which brand equity is established on will vary from context to context. However, they can be usefully categorised into the following four dimensions: 1) Brand loyalty; 2) Brand awareness; 3) Perceived quality; and 4) Brand associations. Therefore, with regard to Q4, this study attempts to extend Aaker's brand equity concept by: 1) discovering new brand equity dimensions within SMBCs (Arsenal's official YouTube channel and AFTV); and 2) highlighting interrelated brand equity dimensions emanating from these SMBCs. In this regard this study finds that: 1) ritual texts, conscious brand loyalty texts, subconscious brand loyalty texts, brand influencer texts, bonding texts, affective analytical texts, and emotional texts contribute to brand emotions as a new brand equity dimension, which provides value to the firm and consumer; and 2) punditry texts, brand influencer texts, experiential texts, community jargon and symbolic texts, and affective analytical texts contribute to brand functionality as a new brand equity dimension, which provides value to both the firm and consumer.

7.5.1.1. Brand emotions

Brand emotions in sport has been discussed by various scholars. Brogi (2014) explains that SMBCs as brand communities within computer-mediated environments where members interact with each other exchanging and sharing information and emotions. Acharya (2019) notes that research and practice have indicated time and again that of all the factors that affect the building of a brand, the capacity to create an emotional connection between a brand and its audience has been found to be crucial. Additionally, it plays a role in generating above-average returns. She adds that as per behavioural science, every human desire to act is motivated by some emotions. There is a chance that the rational thought process may ignore the desire, however, if the emotions are sufficiently powerful, they would supersede rational thinking. Moreover, she argues that emotional connection is what takes an organisation's customers beyond brand loyalty to the supreme measure of an alluring brand i.e., brand advocacy. To a degree, various findings of this study are a testament to this. In this light, Aaker (1991) concept of brand equity depicts brand loyalty as a brand equity dimension of a well-recognized brand and this study finds that beyond this, Arsenal fans utilised conscious and subconscious brand loyalty texts to showcase brand emotions towards

the Arsenal brand. Additionally, it finds that the emotional connection between Arsenal fans to the Arsenal brand goes beyond brand loyalty and enters into the domain of brand advocacy in the form of Arsenal efangelists. On the aspect of fans' love for a sports brand, through their research titled 'Brand Lovemarks Scale of Sport Fans,' Shuv-Ami et al. (2018) found that: 1) the relationship of sport fans with their team is more emotional than functional. It is an emotional relationship because of the feelings that are created: belonging, bonding with other people, joy, and happiness; and 2) fans consider their team as a 'Lovemarks' team and will likely remain loyal fans even if their team has a negative on field performance. Kwak et al. (2011) note that sport offers a unique opportunity to explore how emotions work in people. However, they propose that there is scarce knowledge about the motivational function of stimuli-induced emotions in the spectator sports context. In this regard, this study responds to this proposition and suggests that as a result of content within Arsenal's official YouTube channel and AFTV (external social media stimuli), football fans are induced to share brand emotions through ritual texts, conscious brand loyalty texts, subconscious brand loyalty texts, brand influencer texts, bonding texts, affective analytical texts, and emotional texts. Additionally, Kwak et al. (2011) suggest that people would avoid being associated with the team when negative emotions are linked with it. On the contrary, this study suggests that Arsenal fans remained loyal to the Arsenal brand and shared positive brand emotions despite some of the team's negative on-field performances in the form of conscious brand loyalty texts. In conclusion, this study proposes that brand emotions are consumers' feelings about a brand that result from a strong connection with the brand, and are displayed in the form of rituals, bonding, conscious and subconscious loyalty, influencers, and affective analysis.

7.5.1.2. Brand functionality

On writing about the functional aspects of branded products/services, Aurisicchio et al. (2011) explain; from a social standpoint, products communicate messages about themselves, and their owners and makers. This feature makes products more or less attractive. For example, Apple products are desired, among other factors, by the subsequent social recognition. From an aesthetic point of view, consumers buy and own particular products rather than others as they better meet their sensory values. To put it differently, before buying products consumers judge them to determine if they

appease their sentiment and taste. From an economic perspective, products are traded within a market. The motives behind buying and owning products are linked to the performance of commercial actions. For example, buying a product can be viewed as a type of investment.

Albert and Thirupathi (2009) note that to be successful, it is necessary for a new product to provide customers with better functionality, in comparison to other existing products. In sports, Bruhn and Rohlmann (2023) suggest that some functional product and service aspects include hospitality, fan merchandise, audiovisual broadcasts, and products in modern communication channels such as blockchain(s), crypto technology and Virtual Reality (VR). Vassiliadis et al. (2021) adds that some features of a sports product are entertainment and stadium technology. Additionally, Woratschek and Griebel (2020) note that some special sports features are uncertainty of outcome and co-opetition—when two sports entities compete with each other while simultaneously co-operating with each other to form a sports product feature. In the economic sense, Constantinescu (2011) explains that the term 'sports product' describes the sport good or service offered to consumers in order to meet their sport needs. Furthermore, the consumer can be a live spectator, an audiovisual broadcast viewer, an active participant or a sponsor. She adds that sport marketing professionals hardly have control over the content of a sport product and have no control over their extensions. This study exemplifies this in the sense that Arsenal does not have control over content that is linked to their brand. For example, YouTube videos in the form of post-match interviews on AFTV. In writing about sport on social media, Kavanagh (2025) explicates that live videos (which are a sport product feature) enable brands to connect with consumers in new and exciting ways within the realms of entertainment, and YouTube is a crucial social media platform in this space. He adds that in one month, three in ten individuals who watch YouTube say that they have watched a sports video or clip on the platform. Moreover, with YouTube having the highest membership and visitation rates outside China among those using social media for sports content, it is aiming to be the leading player in social media sports consumption.

Nevertheless, Shuv-Ami et al. (2018) suggest that the relationship of sport fans with their team is more emotional than functional. It is an emotional relationship because of the feelings that are created: belonging, bonding with other people, joy, and happiness. In their study on the impact of social media on managing the image of the

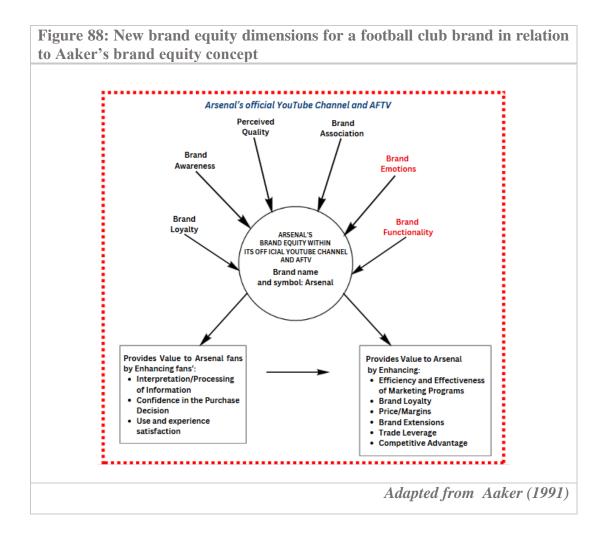
football team, Joanna and Zuzanna (2020) Polish national found commercialisation of sport has caused the Polish national football team to become a brand that triggers positive emotions. Additionally, to a degree these findings relate to those from various scholars who have noted that fans join sport SMBCs for various reasons. These include functional value (perceived utility), emotional value (feelings aroused from perceived utility), epistemic value (knowledge about the brand), entertainment value (enjoyable content), bonding value (feelings of community and connection), and experience sharing (Kaur et al., 2018; Krzyżowski & Strzelecki, 2022; Santos et al. 2022; Chen & Huang, 2022; Sturm, 2020). To sum up, this study proposes that brand functionality refers to the variety of tangible and intangible branded product/service features that operate to meet consumer wants and needs, which results in consumer expert opinions, brand influencers, experiential opinions, community jargon and symbolic language, and affective analytical opinions.

7.5.1.3. Brand emotions and brand functionality in relation to Aaker's brand equity concept

According to IUJ Journal Of Management (2022), theory plays a crucial role in research. It offers explanation, understanding and meaningfulness to research. It also helps to identify unexplored research areas. Additionally, research without theory is less likely to establish the relationship among attributes, variables or data. Thus, it should emphatically explain how and why something is as it is in a type of research. Theory also helps to extend knowledge about a phenomenon. Regarding practice, theory and research together should lay its foundation. It helps to connect the abstract and concrete, which ultimately results in relevant and research application-oriented practice. Johnson (2018) presents a dot-to-dot explanation of theories in research. He notes that theories help to organise relevant empirical facts in order to build a context for understanding phenomena. Moreover, a theory is a way to explain a set of facts in that if reality were a dot-to-dot picture, a theory would be a way to link a set of data dots. However, varying theories connect different data dots in different ways resulting in a wide variety of pictures and practices. Thus, varying theoretical standpoints, while based on a set of empirical data can frequently support different practices or practical ideas. For Johnson (2018), theories are not meant to be eternal entities, rather, they are formed to exist only as long as they continue to explain facts or link the relevant data dots. Finally, theories can often be utilised to justify a practice for which there may not be direct research-based evidence.

With regard to contributing to brand equity theory, Aaker (1991) maintains that the brand equity dimensions (brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality and brand associations) from his concept can be utilised by schools of management where faculty and students are attempting to advance how brand equity is managed. In some circumstances, he postulates that it might be useful to explicitly include other brand equity dimensions as outputs of brand equity as well as inputs. In addition, other researchers have indicated that further research can focus on developing more brand equity dimensions especially, in areas such as sport and social media (Shariq, 2018 Veloutsou et al., 2020; Rojas-Lamorena et al., 2022).

To this end, figure 88 illustrates the two new brand equity dimensions (Brand Emotions and Brand Functionality) that are a result of findings in relation to Q4 of this study. It's theoretical framework is adapted from Aaker (1991) brand equity concept which postulates that brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality and brand association are dimensions that lead to the brand equity of an organisation. In turn, this provides value to both the consumer and the organisation. Accordingly, this study finds that brand emotions and brand functionality are also dimensions that lead to brand equity of an organisation in this case, Arsenal. Subsequently, Arsenal's brand equity to both Arsenal fans and the club. For the Arsenal brand, fans within their official YouTube channel and AFTV showcase brand emotions through: ritual texts, conscious brand loyalty texts, subconscious brand loyalty texts, brand influencer texts, bonding texts, affective analytical texts, and emotional texts. And behaviour towards brand functionality through: punditry texts, brand influencer texts, experiential texts, community jargon and symbolic texts, and affective analytical texts.

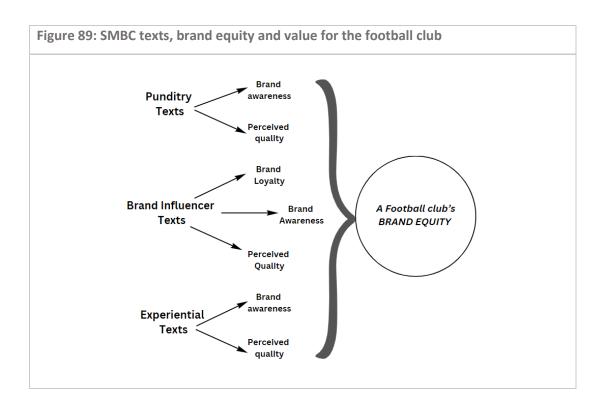


7.5.2. Interrelated brand equity dimensions

Aaker (1991) notes that there exist interrelationships among his brand equity dimensions. For example, perceived quality could be influenced by awareness where a visible name is likely to be well made, by associations, a visible spokesperson would only endorse a quality product, and by loyalty, a loyal customer would not like a poor product. Additionally, he points out that it might be useful to explicitly explore other interrelationships among the brand equity dimensions. In this regard, this study finds that: 1) punditry texts contribute to both brand awareness and perceived quality as dimensions of brand equity; 2) brand influencer texts contribute to brand loyalty, brand awareness, and perceived quality as dimensions of brand equity; and 3) experiential texts contribute to both perceived quality, and brand awareness as dimensions of brand equity. Figure 89 illustrates these interrelationships. In this light, within the literature review, Cheng et al. (2019) conducted research on linking relationship equity to brand

resonance in SMBCs of multinational brands. They discovered that information search and social interactivity are the antecedents of customer brand engagement and customer brand engagement is a dynamic of brand resonance. They recommend that:

1) a firm is able to enjoy the synthesised values of relationship equity and brand equity by allocating appropriate resources to SMBC management; and 2) that the more an online user participates in an SMBC, the higher the levels of brand value that are created for an organisation's brand.



7.6. Q5 How can football clubs nurture and maintain brand equity within football official and Fan TV YouTube channels?

Lim and Bowman (2023) postulate that research is not merely the search for new knowledge, but a vessel for resolving challenges and enriching practice. Real contribution to practice occurs when there is tangible advancement in the conditions of stakeholders, originating from practical improvements steered by insightful research. In writing about managing disasters in the brand context, Aaker (1991) notes that, "the most dramatic damage facing a brand is a disaster affecting its image, and thus its equity" (p. 54). For Arsenal, a global brand, which has existed from the year 1886, maintaining and nurturing its brand equity within: 1) the club's official SMBCs

such as Arsenal's official YouTube channel; and 2) a user SMBC such as AFTV, is of paramount importance given the rich history, and high brand value (\$851 million) the Arsenal brand has. This forms the basis of this study's practical contribution.

7.7.1. Practical contribution

Aaker (1991) postulates that a key practical contribution for brand equity is rooted where assets or liabilities are associated to the name and/or symbol of the brand. Thus, brand equity practically provides value to firms by enhancing: 1) efficiency and effectiveness of marketing programs; 2) brand loyalty; 3) price/margins; 4) brand extensions; 5) trade leverage; and 6) competitive advantage. In the context of this study, by understanding how brand equity exists within Arsenal's official YouTube channel, and AFTV, a Fan TV channel established by Arsenal fans, the Arsenal brand can especially benefit from providing value to the club by enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of online marketing programs through tailored content on their official YouTube channel and AFTV in strategic collaborative and co-creative endeavours; and 2) Enhancing brand engagement through brand equity SMBC texts that showcase brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand associations as depicted in the data analysis chapters, section 7.2 (Q1), and section 7.3 (Q2) of this chapter. Moreover, further practical contributions lie in the following marketing strategies, which are related to section 7.4 (Q3): 1) YouTube buyer personas; 2) Match highlights and post-match interviews (on AFTV); and 3) Ubuntu: collaboration and co-creation.

7.7.1.1. YouTube fan personas

In the literature review, Fletcher (2020) asserts that the buyer persona spring brings the organisation closer to their target market by implementing strategies that consider a consumer's social media channels, content and data. He asserts that these elements form the most crucial parts of the relationship between an organisation and their buyer persona. Accordingly, in chapter 2 of this thesis, the Buyer Persona Institute (2024) notes that a buyer persona discloses insights about the consumer's decisions—the attitudes, concerns, decision criteria, and journey that drive prospective customers to select a brand, its competitor or the status quo. They inform the organisation on how to influence buyers, so they can choose the organisation's brand. They add that buyer

personas are important because: 1) they enable data-driven decisions; 2) personalised marketing; and 3) an improved customer experience. Figure 90 illustrates examples of YouTube fan personas that Arsenal can utilise in their digital marketing strategies.



From figure 90, we can deduce that through the findings of this research with regard to Q3, Arsenal can form fan personas so as to implement online marketing programs through tailored content on their official YouTube channel and AFTV. Additionally, this can enhance the club's brand engagement through brand equity SMBC texts that showcase brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand associations with fans from different fan segments.

7.7.1.2. Brand engagement and cultural lingua

In the literature review, a marketing strategy used to share brand-related content within official adaptation of brand content to consumer ethnicity through language adaptation, identity elements, and identity matching has been acknowledged by Villegas and Marin (2022). For example, in his post-match AFTV interview, Belgium, a well-known regular interviewee emphasised that fans should believe that the team can win the EPL. In this regard one fan said, 'Big up to Belgium for always believing.' This is encouraged loyalty to the Arsenal brand through Belgium's belief that the team

will win the EPL. Notably, the fan culturally uses Jamaican patois to show support for Belgium by saying, 'Big up.' In this sense, some fans have adopted the use of this Jamaican patois phrase to show support for Belgium. This term is deeply rooted in Jamaican culture and has found its way within AFTV's community, which has some Jamaican Arsenal fans. Through a collaborative/co-creational marketing strategy with AFTV, Arsenal could share creative content and promote club merchandise through their social media channels by paying respect to the cultural lingua that fans within this community have adopted. Figure 91 illustrates an example of how they could do this. In this light, a continuous cultural connection between Arsenal and its fans by paying homage to how brand equity is expressed in their lingua, for example, Jamaican patois, can create a strong relationship or bond between the Arsenal brand and the club's fans. From figure 91, we can deduce that Arsenal can further use cultural lingua from AFTV's community members to promote the club's season 2024/25 home kit through their Instagram social media channel.



7.7.1.3. Match-highlights vs Post-match interviews

Match-highlights offer the Arsenal brand an apt benefit in the form of exclusive license rights to their match highlights. Within the brand community formed around this content, Arsenal is able to strengthen its brand loyalty through the recognition and utilisation of: 1) ritual texts; 2) conscious brand loyalty texts; and 3) subconscious

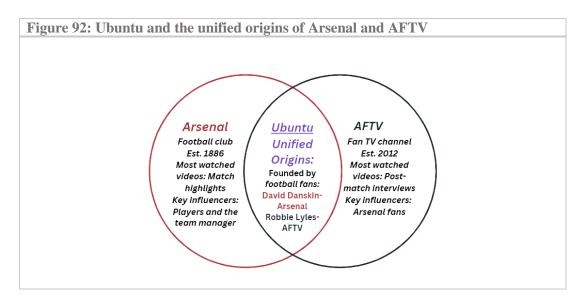
brand loyalty texts. Equally, they are able to do the same within AFTV's post-match interviews, and go further through the recognition and utilisation of brand influencer texts, which are catalysed by key well-known and highly respected members of AFTV such as Kelechi. Where brand awareness is concerned, Arsenal is able to strengthen its brand awareness through the recognition and utilisation of punditry texts and rival commendation texts. The club is able to do the same within AFTV and advance its brand awareness through the recognition and utilisation of brand influencer texts, which stem from key well-known and highly respected members of AFTV. Additionally, Arsenal is able to improve its perceived quality through the recognition and utilisation of: 1) punditry texts; and 2) community jargon and symbolic texts. Likewise, they are able to do the same within AFTV as these texts exists within both YouTube channels. Lastly, the Arsenal brand can enhance its brand associations through the recognition and utilisation of: 1) affective analytical texts; 2) historical narrative texts; and 3) experiential and bonding texts. Such texts are unique to Arsenal's official YouTube channel because of the nature of match highlights, which are exclusively available to the Arsenal brand. For example, fans are able to recognise the team's togetherness on the field as it is possible to observe this value in these match highlights, whereas fans are not able to do so on AFTV because AFTV does not have exclusive rights to display Arsenal match highlights on their channel. In this light, within AFTV, the Arsenal brand can advance its brand associations through the recognition and utilisation of: 1) away fan recognition texts; and 2) emotional texts, which are unique to AFTV.

7.7.1.4. Ubuntu: collaboration and co-creation

According to Thompsell (2019), ubuntu is a multifaceted word from the Nguni languages, which are a group of connected languages that are spoken in Southern Africa, mostly in South Africa, Swaziland, and Zimbabwe. At the core of each definition, is the connectedness that exists or should exist between people. In this regard, Mugumbate and Nyanguru (2013) explain that ubuntu can be best defined as an African philosophy that focuses on the importance of 'being self through others.' For them, it is a form of humanism, which can be expressed in the phrases 'I am because of who we all are' and ubuntu ngumuntu ngabantu in Zulu language. They add that so far, it has been successfully integrated in theology, management and

computer science. Withal, based on the findings showcased in this section, in the spirit of ubuntu, Arsenal have the opportunity to integrate this philosophy within their digital marketing campaigns through collaborative and co-creative efforts between the club and AFTV.

A central reason for this does not entirely dwell in the brand equity benefits to the club but also, within the core of Arsenal's brand origins—Arsenal is based in Islington, North London, England and is popularly known as 'the Gunners' in reference to the club being formed by workers from an armament factory in Woolwich. The nickname pays respect to the club's crest which famously features a cannon (Goal, 2020). Additionally, the club was founded by a group of friends led by a Scottish man known as David Danskin, a labourer at the Arsenal Munitions factory in Woolwich, in 1886 (Arsenal, 2017). This strongly suggests that the brand was created by working-class people who had a special interest in football. Many years down the line, Arsenal has transitioned into a football household name with a brand value of \$851 million (Statista, 2024). With the advent of the internet, AFTV a Fan TV YouTube channel established by Robbie Lyle popularly known as 'Don Robbie' in 2012 is largely made up of fans of Arsenal. It was established to provide a platform for football fans to air their views without restriction or censorship before, during, and after football matches of Arsenal. Like the Arsenal brand (in its origins) this also strongly suggests that AFTV was created by working class people who have a strong interest in football. Yet both entities (Arsenal and AFTV) exist independently with no affiliation to each other whatsoever. This is because Arsenal requested AFTV to withdraw the name 'Arsenal' from its brand-related content over fears about its negativity and harm to the Arsenal brand. Thus causing Arsenal Fan TV at the time to change its name to AFTV (Smith, 2018; Storer, 2018). This disconnect or anti-ubuntu motif is an anomaly because in the spirit of ubuntu (I am because of who we all are), Arsenal is because of football fans such as David Danskin, the club's founder, and similarly AFTV is because of football fans such as Robbie Lyle, the YouTube channel's founder. Additionally, as illustrated in table 20, both their YouTube channels share Aaker (1991) brand equity dimensions (brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand associations). Ultimately, and in the spirit of ubuntu, Arsenal and AFTV are because of who football fans are (see figure 92).



Furthermore, co-creation between firms and consumers is recognised and acknowledged in literature. Thomas (2018) notes that there is limited present knowledge on fans, sponsors and co-creation, yet fans are active, commanding and critical influencers who are able to develop co-creative relationships with their teams, clubs and online communities. In the literature review, within the co-creative systems era (1995-1999), firms incorporated users into production of content through official virtual communities. For example, in a co-creative effort, Amazon created virtual communities to enable customers to rate and review books and other products (Kozinets, 2020). Additionally, eBay also known as Auction.com in 1995 was developed as a virtual community geared towards buying and selling of goods (Tarnoff, 2022). Additionally, Rossolatos (2019) contends that SMBCs have a cocreative, participatory potential whereby consumers actively contribute to the production of meaningful brand avenues in a virtual mutual relationship with brands. He adds that improved brand loyalty and enhanced brand equity have been repeatedly proposed as outcomes of a positively engaged community of brand aficionados. Within AFTV, such brand aficionados are Helen, Kelechi, Jason, Robbie Lyle aka 'Don Robbie' and Ty amongst others.

7.7. Chapter summary

This chapter has highlighted a discussion based on this study's findings. It began with an introduction highlighting the chapter's guide, which are this study's research questions. Thus, it continued by depicting how the findings answered the first research question (How is the brand equity of a football club showcased through digital data

traces within football official and Fan TV YouTube channels?), the second research question (How is the brand equity of a football club showcased comparatively with regard to football official and Fan TV YouTube channels?), the third research question (How do digital data traces within football official and Fan TV YouTube channels showcase new and interrelated brand equity dimensions?), the fourth research question (How do digital data traces within football official and Fan TV YouTube channels showcase new and interrelated brand equity dimensions?) and, the fifth research question (How can football clubs nurture and maintain brand equity within football official and Fan TV YouTube channels?). The next chapter concludes this study.

CONCLUSION

8.1. Introduction

This chapter concludes this thesis by focusing on the following areas: 1) Implications on SMBC literature; 2) Implications on the brand equity concept; 3) Managerial implications; 4) Methodological implications; 5) Future research implications; and 6) Talenting. It begins by discussing this study's main contributions to SMBC literature and moves on to highlight its implications on the concept of brand equity literature, highlighting how this study has contributed to research in this area. It follows this with a discussion on this study's managerial implications, which entails how brand managers can utilise this study to maintain, nurture and grow a football club's brand equity. Additionally, it also highlights this study's methodological implications and provides recommendations for future research within the ever-changing world of football official and user SMBCs. Lastly, it closes with talenting, a netnographic artistic expression.

8.2. Implications on SMBC literature

With regard to SMBCs, Woods and Ludvigsen (2022) recommended that further study of fan online spaces should be conducted, noting that football Fan TV YouTube channels are yet to be sufficiently examined. This study aimed to cover this gap by examining AFTV, a Fan TV YouTube channel and how brand equity is showcased within such a user SMBC. Additionally, Hook et al. (2018) recommended that research should be undertaken on long-term consequences of brand community participation. They also called for research on fan segmentation across all forms of brand communities. In this regard, this study found that there are positive long-term consequences of brand community participation in the form of value to a football club brand through brand equity SMBC texts. Additionally, this study uncovered various fan segments across football official and user SMBCs—segments such as Arsenal efangelists, Arsenal multifaceted fans, Arsenal's Kelechi brigade among others.

Drawing on qualitative methodology, Trivedi et al. (2021) recommended that a small sample should be used to unravel deeper insights related to fan behaviour on social media platforms. In a similar vein, Cheung, et al. (2022) call for qualitative research on brand community dynamics and different perspectives of consumer and brand community relationships. In this light, this study conducted a netnography and

incorporated observation using an immersion journal as a qualitative research method to unravel deeper insights related to football fan behaviour on official and user SMBCs. Moreover, Sharif et al. (2022) studied antecedents of brand loyalty using brand personality as a moderator in SMBCs of fashion clothing brands. They recommended that: 1) a comparative study should be undertaken of at least two different social media platforms, or in different social contexts; and 2) it should focus on different industry sectors. In relation to this, Dessart et al. (2015) also called for a study on the comparison of online brand community engagement across different social media platforms. In this sense, this study: 1) conducted a comparative analysis of an official and user SMBC with regard to how brand equity is showcased between both YouTube channels; and 2) focused on a different industry, that is football. Among other areas of SMBC literature, this study contributes to research on positive and negative brand engagement within SMBCs.

8.3. Implications on the brand equity concept

Hikichi (2023) steered a netnography on the impact of social media in building brand equity. She recommended that there is interest in exploring whether social media sites such as YouTube, which emphasise video footage over words, play a role in influencing the brand equity of an organisation. In this regard, this study focused on official and user SMBCs on YouTube and their role as conveyors and builders of a football club's brand equity. In their study on the influence of social media communication on brand equity, Grubor et al. (2017) found that firm-generated social media communication positively affects all the brand equity dimensions, and usergenerated social media communication negatively impacts perceived quality and behavioural quality. Regardless, they asserted that there is room for widening research on social media communication and brand equity. In this light, this study found that within football official and user SMBCs, both firm-generated and user-generated social media communication conveyed positive perceived quality and behavioural quality texts.

In their research on drivers of fan loyalty, Yun et al. (2020) found that there is a gap in sport-marketing research in what contributes to fan loyalty. In aiming to fill this gap, this study focused on football official and user SMBCs and how brand equity, which has brand loyalty as a dimension, is showcased within these communities.

Zhang and Patrick (2021) found brand relationship quality-indicating cues such as brand nicknames and note that they enhance perceived information authenticity in online communication. They add that the use of brand nicknames in the marketplace is broad and nuanced, thus, current research does not fully address every aspect of the use of brand nicknames. They recommend that future research, therefore, could: 1) investigate how brand attachment cues can affect aspects of consumers' information processing; 2) explore how to strategically utilise brand attachment cues without exaggeration. This is because brand nicknames are relatively subtle linguistic cues in the way in which they signal brand attachment; and 3) study potential moderators that could enable firms to benefit from using their nicknames in firm-generated social media content. In this sense, this study explored Arsenal, a football club brand that has two nicknames: 1) The Gunners; and 2) The Gooners, which were often used by football fans within official and user SMBCs in their brand equity texts.

Withal, this study's implications on the brand equity concept indicate that: 1) ritual texts, conscious and subconscious brand loyalty texts, brand influencer texts, bonding texts, affective analytical texts, and emotional texts, contribute to brand emotions as a new brand equity dimension; and 2) punditry texts, brand influencer texts, experiential texts, community jargon, symbolic texts and affective analytical texts, contribute to brand functionality as a new brand equity dimension. Additionally, this study finds that: 1) punditry texts contribute to both brand awareness and perceived quality as dimensions of brand equity; 2) brand influencer texts contribute to brand loyalty, brand awareness, and perceived quality as dimensions of brand equity; and 3) experiential texts contribute to both perceived quality and brand awareness as dimensions of brand equity.

8.4. Managerial implications

The managerial implications of this study are based on Aaker (1991) concept of brand equity in conjunction to this study's findings. By investigating brand equity dimensions and football SMBC texts (brand loyalty texts, brand awareness texts, perceived quality texts, brand associations texts) and additional brand equity dimensions (brand emotions and brand functionality), football club brand managers can provide value to football clubs in the following ways:

- 1. Enhance marketing programs to attract new customers or recapture old ones. For example, football brand managers can tailor online marketing communications strategies in official and user SMBCs on YouTube to attract new football fans, strengthen the club's connection with existing fans, and entice former fans of the football club. In relation to this study's findings Arsenal brand managers could improve their YouTube and other social media marketing programs by tailoring the tone and cultural lingua, including community jargon and symbolic text, which are part of how fans expressed perceived quality within Arsenal's official YouTube channel and AFTV (see subsection 7.3.5.2. and 7.3.6.2.). Additionally, this is in relation to the tone and cultural lingua used by their fans within their official YouTube channel and AFTV to generally express other brand equity dimensions (brand loyalty, brand awareness, brand associations, brand emotions and brand functionality see subsections 7.5.1.1 and 7.5.1.2 for brand emotions and brand functionality). Moreover, Arsenal could enhance engagement with potential new fans, who this study proposes are part of the fan segment of 'Arsenal's spectators' (see section 7.4.4.). Examples of such fans are ones who support FC Barcelona and Ajax Amsterdam. Enhanced engagement through social media content that resonates with such fans (content about Arsenal's football philosophy) could lead them into making Arsenal their second team of choice.
- 2. Strengthen the loyalty of existing fans by collaborating with influential figures in user SMBCs like Kelechi from AFTV, and his fan segment 'Arsenal's Kelechi Brigade' (see section 7.4.5.) especially when the club's on-field performances are unsatisfactory. This could strengthen brand loyalty and develop a stronger emotional and cultural connection from and with Arsenal fans who resonate with Kelechi's cultural background (Nigeria, Africa and Afro-British).
- 3. Enable the club to set price margins by permitting both premium pricing and decreased reliance on promotions. For example, collaborating with influential user SMBC figures such as Kelechi and other AFTV influencers (see subsection 7.2.2) to endorse club products/services, thus leveraging on Kelechi's strong emotional connection with Arsenal fans. This could enhance the perceived quality of Arsenal products/services, which will enable the club

- to set premium pricing for branded products and services such as branded merchandise, stadium tours and events etc.
- 4. Provide a platform for growth through brand extensions. For example, by continually investigating brand engagement within football official and user SMBCs, football clubs can discover opportunities for brand extensions by conceiving new products and services such as: podcasts, social media shows and digital comic books amongst others etc. For Arsenal, a collaborative social media marketing endeavour with AFTV would mean access to products such as AFTV's numerous podcasts and YouTube football shows. Thus saving them on the cost of resources they would have to invest in if they were to create their own. Additionally, AFTV has a number of well-known personalities (such as Kelechi, Helen, Robbie Lyles, Lee Judges etc.) whom Arsenal can employ to drive the entertainment value of such branded extensions (podcasts and YouTube football shows).
- 5. Provide leverage in the distribution channel. If within football official and user SMBCs, a football club brand is perceived as a proven brand, then brand collaborators such as club sponsors and kit manufacturers will have less uncertainty dealing with the club as it has achieved recognition and positive brand associations within football official and user SMBCs such as Arsenal's official YouTube channel and AFTV. In this sense, Arsenal could use their brand equity presence (brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, brand emotions, and brand functionality, See section 7.2. and subsection 7.5.2.) within their official YouTube channels and AFTV to showcase their strong brand engagement and thus gain bargaining power in sponsorship deals, kit manufacturing deals, and brand collaborations.

Finally, this study recommends that in good practice football club brand managers can maintain and nurture a club's brand equity by incorporating the following aspects in their digital marketing programs: 1) YouTube buyer personas; 2) Brand engagement and cultural lingua; 3) Match highlights and fan post-match interviews from an official YouTube channel and a Fan TV YouTube channel respectively; and 4) Ubuntu—collaboration and content co-creation between the club and Fan TV YouTube channels.

8.5. Methodological implications

The methodological implications of this study lie in applying netnography, an advancing research method that was born from the intellect of its father Robert Kozinets in 1995, which is still youthful in comparison to traditional anthropological methods that have been used by researchers for centuries—as early as approx. 484-425 BCE Herodotus, the father of history, was employing proto-anthropological research in his historical literature and writings about travel. Thus, by employing netnography, this study contributes to the growth and maturity of a methodological approach within the complex world of SMBCs in the sport context. In this sense, this study also aimed at achieving the hallmarks of netnography as postulated by Kozinets (2020) (see table 23).

Table 23: Hallmarks of a netnography	
Hallmark	Check
Educate us about what is happening in the world of social media.	/
Follow some topic or some group, informing us about what is being said and how it works in a social system.	/
Focus on a particular characteristic such as the categories of contents of the interactions in public social media of different types, or the communication strategies, or the types of communications or connections.	/
Present data in connection to a research field, its constructs, theoretical orientation, and data sites used.	/
Employ the stages of initiation, investigation, immersion, integration and instantiation.	/
Use micro-logical methods to examine small fragments and expand them into major illustrations of holistic conclusions.	/

Another area of this study's methodological contribution lies in a reflection concerning the researcher's background as: 1) a long-time member of Arsenal's online football fan communities—Arsenal's official YouTube channel and AFTV; and 2) a researcher of these communities.

8.5.1. Reflection: The Arsenal fan and the researcher

Walshaw (2008) notes that putting the researcher into the research is considered a method to move beyond subscribing to a specific modernist set of assumptions informing conceptions of what it means to know and what it means to know others. This is a set of assumptions to the consequence that researchers are able to put themselves in another's (participant's) place and have knowledge of his/her circumstances and interests in precisely the same manner as he/she (participant) would know them. In this sense, as an Arsenal fan conducting research on fellow Arsenal fans within football SMBCs, this poses an interesting contribution to netnography. In the preliminary stages of this research, I took on the role of an un-official/unrecruited Arsenal brand manager/activist aiming for this study to nurture and protect the Arsenal brand due to its historical richness and longevity, largely due to my intense emotional attachment as a supporter of the club for several years. In this sense, I strongly desired to 'protect' the Arsenal brand from user SMBCs such as AFTV who have the autonomy to share sentiments about the club's brand without restrictions from the club.

In Netnocon 2023, like an experienced football manager on the sideline of a football pitch, Prof. Robert Kozinets graciously reminded me of my role in this netnographic journey. Shedding his wisdom and intellect upon my netnographic clumsiness, he advised me that I was both a netnographer and a football fan, and not an Arsenal brand manager. Accordingly, with due diligence, I rightly found myself 'in the middle of the park' with one half of the park being the official Arsenal YouTube channel and the other half AFTV. It is intricate lessons like these that this study contributes to netnography, a reminder of what identity a researcher has to undertake so as to produce and meet the hallmarks of a netnographic account. Especially, if the researcher: 1) has been for many years, a part of the SMBCs that he/she is studying; and 2) has developed a deep emotional attachment to a brand that is the focus of his/her research.

8.6. Future research implications

In terms of research vehicles, this research was limited to one, that is the Arsenal brand, an EPL football club located in Islington, North London. Future studies could expand this scope by adopting more football club brands in similar work. Specifically, football club brands from different geographic locations and league tiers for example,

the English Football League (EFL). This could provide richer cultural insights in relation to football club brands from lower leagues, different top tier leagues and global fandom at large. Moreover, this study focused on the Arsenal men's team as a part of the Arsenal brand. Future research could focus on female teams who are part of a multinational brand like Arsenal. For example, FC Barcelona Femeni, a fast growing and well-known women's team. Fenton et al. (2024) note that given the worldwide advancement of women's football and its existence on social media, it is critical to explore and understand fan attitudes and culture showcased through online commentary on female professional football players. Additionally, this study focused on football official and user SMBCs within one social media channel, that is YouTube. Future studies could extend 'the park' by incorporating more social media channels such as Facebook, Instagram, X and TikTok among others, in order to gain a wider understanding on how football fans within football official and user SMBCs engage with football club brands.

In terms of the customised procedural movements of netnography, this study utilised non-obtrusive immersion as a data collection operation to study the football official and user SMBCs at hand. Future studies could integrate a combination of immersion, interaction and investigation in their procedural movements. Moreover, as Marchowska-Raza (2024) recommends, future studies should gather real-time data and utilise a social engagement interaction strategy, that encourages researchers' participatory interaction, which could provide deeper insights into the underlying motives behind consumers' posted comments. Finally, this study utilised an immersion journal as one qualitative data collection method. Future studies could incorporate a blended approach, which according to Fenton and Procter (2019) can involve the blend of the three qualitative research methods: interview, social network analysis (SNA), and online participant observation. They add that interviews and participant observation are typical features of ethnographical work, however, evolving digital tools and social media networks present new research opportunities. The application of netnography and blending of social network analysis therefore presents new opportunities for research.

8.7. Talenting

Kozinets (2020) asserts that talenting interpretations are systematic ways to incrementally, and in a completely risk-free way, entice our engagement with art as a way to analyse the data collected as part of netnography. For him, art of any kind, creation of any kind, is about gaining a hidden understanding. Additionally, it is about tapping our untapped abilities to recognise larger patterns. He recommends that it can be presented in any preferred medium such as a poem. In the book of Ecclesiastes, the wise teacher says:

"Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh" (Ecclesiastes, 12:12b).

In this light, the following Haiku concludes this netnography.

"Football is God's gift, Netnography can help us appreciate it."

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Appendix 1: Methodology of the key research reviewed in chapter 2 (SMBCs)

Nature of the key research reviewed in chapter 2 (SMBCs)			
Study	Quantitative	Qualitative	Mixed
Muniz, A. M., & O'Guinn, T. C. (2001). Brand Community. Journal of Consumer Research, 27(4),		Ethnography	
412–432.			
Veloutsou, C., & Moutinho, L. (2009). Brand relationships through brand reputation and brand	Questionnaire		
tribalism. Journal of Business Research, 62(3), 314–322.			
Santos, Z. R., Coelho, P. S., & Rita, P. (2022). Fostering Consumer–Brand Relationships through	Questionnaire		
social media brand communities. Journal of Marketing Communications, 28(7), 768–798.			
Petersen-Wagner, R. (2018). Between old and new traditions: Transnational solidarities and the		Netnography	
love for Liverpool FC. In Digital Football Cultures.			
Ul Islam, J., & Rahman, Z. (2017). The impact of online brand community characteristics on	Questionnaire		
customer engagement: An application of Stimulus Organism-Response paradigm. Telematics and			
Informatics, 34(4), 96–109.			
Marzocchi, G., Morandin, G., & Bergami, M. (2013). Brand communities: Loyal to the community	Questionnaire		
or the brand? European Journal of Marketing, 47(1/2), 93114.			
Krzyżowski, F., & Strzelecki, A. (2022). Creating a fan bond with a football club on	Survey		
social media: A case of Polish fans. Soccer & Society, 1–14.			
Cobigo, V., Martin, L., & Mcheimech, R. (2016). Understanding Community.		Qualitative	
		literature review	
McMillan, D. W., & Chavis, D. M. (1986). Sense of community: A definition and theory. Journal		Qualitative	
of Community Psychology, 14(1), 6–23.		literature review	
McMillan, D. W., & Chavis, D. M. (1986). Sense of community: A definition and theory. Journal		Qualitative	
of Community Psychology, 14(1), 6–23.		thought piece	
Cova, B. (1997). Community and consumption: Towards a definition of the "linking		Qualitative	
value" of product or services. European Journal of Marketing, 31(3/4), 297316.		thought piece	
Aoki, K. (1994). VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES IN JAPAN. Www.Ibiblio.Org.		Internet	
		ethnography	

Kozinets, R. V. (2010). Brand Fans: When Entertainment + Marketing Intersect on the Net. In	Qualitative
Enterprise 2.0: How Technology, E-Commerce, and Web 2.0 Are Transforming Business Virtually (Vol. 2, pp. 145–156).	thought piece
Avis, M., & Henderson, I. L. (2022). A solution to the problem of brand definition. European Journal of Marketing, 56(2), 351–374.	Qualitative literature review
Habibi, M. R., Laroche, M., & Richard, MO. (2014). Brand communities based in social media: How unique are they? Evidence from two exemplary brand communities. International Journal of Information Management, 34(2), 123-132.	Netnography
Brogi, S. (2014). Online Brand Communities: A Literature Review. Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences, 109, 385–389.	Qualitative literature review
Thompson, AJ., Martin, A. J., Gee, S., & Geurin, A. N. (2018). Building brand and fan relationships through social media. Sport, Business and Management: An International Journal, 8(3), 235–256.	Qualitative content analysis
Hollebeek, L. D. (2011). Demystifying customer brand engagement: Exploring the loyalty nexus. Journal of Marketing Management, 27(7–8), 785–807.	Qualitative literature review
Obilo, O. O., Chefor, E., & Saleh, A. (2021). Revisiting the consumer brand engagement concept. Journal of Business Research, 126, 634–643	Survey
Brodie, R. J., Hollebeek, L. D., Jurić, B., & Ilić, A. (2011). Customer Engagement: Conceptual Domain, Fundamental Propositions, and Implications for Research. Journal of Service Research, 14(3), 252–271. https://doi.org/10.1177/1094670511411703	Qualitative literature review
Colicev, A., Kumar, A., & O'Connor, P. (2019). Modeling the relationship between firm and user generated content and the stages of the marketing funnel. International Journal of Research in Marketing, 36(1), 100–116.	Qualitative content analysis
Santos, M. L. B. dos. (2022). The "so-called" UGC: An updated definition of user generated content in the age of social media. Online Information Review, 46(1), 95–113.	Qualitative literature review
Andrews, D. L., & Ritzer, G. (2018). Sport and prosumption. Journal of Consumer Culture, 18(2), 356–373.	Qualitative literature review
Kim, J., Kang, S., & Lee, K. H. (2021). Evolution of digital marketing communication: Bibliometric analysis and network visualization from key articles.	Qualitative literature review
Busca, L., & Bertrandias, L. (2020). A Framework for Digital Marketing Research:	Qualitative literature review

<i>Investigating the Four Cultural Eras of Digital Marketing. Journal of Interactive Marketing,</i> 49(1), 1–19.			
Woods, J., & Ludvigsen, J. A. L. (2022). The changing faces of fandom? Exploring emerging 'online' and 'offline' fandom spaces in the English Premier League.		Qualitative literature review	
Meire, M., Hewett, K., Ballings, M., Kumar, V., & Van den Poel, D. (2019). The Role of Marketer-Generated Content in Customer Engagement Marketing. 336 Journal of Marketing, 83(6), 21–42.	Qualitative content analysis		
Vannier Borges, F. (2018). Always Together: How Football Clubs Want Constant Connections with Fans. ATHENS JOURNAL OF SPORTS, 5(4), 263–278.		Ethnographic- interviews	
Machado, J. C., Martins, C. C., Ferreira, F. C., Silva, S. C., & Duarte, P. A. (2020). Motives to engage with sports brands on Facebook and Instagram—The case of a Portuguese football club. International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship, 21(2), 325–349.	Online survey		
Villegas, D. A., & Marin, A. M. (2022). Bilingual brand communities? Strategies for argeting Hispanics on social media. Journal of Product & Brand Management, 31(4), 586–605.		Netnography	
Burton, N., & McClean, C. (2021). Exploring newsjacking as social media–based ambush marketing. Sport, Business and Management: An International Journal, 11(2), 143–163.			Qualitative and quantitative content analysis
Huang, T. K., Wang, YT., & Lin, KY. (2022). Enhancing brand loyalty through online brand communities: The role of community benefits. Journal of Product & Brand Management, 31(5), 823–838.	Online survey		
Faisal, M. M., Akhtar, M., Hafeez, H. M., & Athar, M. R. (n.d.). The Impact of Social Value, Content Value and Brand Equity in Social Media Brand Communities.	Questionnaire		
Cheung, ML., Pires, G., & Rosenberger III, P. (2020). The influence of perceived social media marketing elements on consumer—brand engagement and brand knowledge. Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics, ahead-of-print.	Online survey		
Kumar, J. (2021). Understanding customer brand engagement in brand communities: An application of psychological ownership theory and congruity theory. European Journal of Marketing, 55(4), 969–994.	Online survey		
Chen, HY., & Huang, KP. (2020). THE EFFECT OF CONSUMER ENGEGEMENT IN ONLINE BRAND COMMUNITY ON PURCHASE INTENTION-THE CASE STUDY OF NEWLY LAUNCHED COSMETIC PRODUCTS.	Questionnaire		

Dias, Á. L., Pereira, L., & Costa, R. L. (2022). Outcomes of Social Media Marketing in Sport	Questionnaire		
Brands: International Journal of Service Science, Management, Engineering, and Technology,	2.005.00.00.00		
<i>13(1), 1–22.</i>			
Trivedi, J., Soni, S., & Kishore, A. (2021). Exploring the Role of Social Media Communications in	Online survey		
the Success of Professional Sports Leagues: An Emerging Market Perspective. Journal of			
Promotion Management, 27(2), 306–331.			
McGillivray, D., & McLaughlin, E. (2018). Transnational digital fandom: Club media, place, and			Online survey and
(networked) space. In Digital Football Cultures. Routledge.			interviews
Diachi, A. C., Tansu, A., & Osemeahon, O. S. (2021a). No One Is Leaving This Time: Social	Survey		
Media Fashion Brand Communities. Sustainability, 13(23), 12957.			
Heerden, D. van, & Wiese, M. (2021). Why do consumers engage in online brand communities –	Questionnaire		
and why should brands care? The Journal of Consumer Marketing, 38(4), 353–363.			
Alonso-Dos-Santos, M., Rejón Guardia, F., Pérez Campos, C., Calabuig-Moreno, F.,	Online survey		
& Ko, Y. J. (2018). Engagement in sports virtual brand communities. Journal			
of Business Research, 89, 273–279.			
Bowden, J., & Mirzaei, A. (2021). Consumer engagement within retail communication channels:	Online survey		
An examination of online brand communities and digital content marketing initiatives. European			
Journal of Marketing, 55(5), 1411–1439.			
Healy, J. C., & McDonagh, P. (2013). Consumer roles in brand culture and value cocreation in		Netnography	
virtual communities. Journal of Business Research, 66(9), 1528-1540.			
Rivers, D. J., & Ross, A. S. (2021). "This channel has more subs from rival fans than Arsenal		Qualitative content	
fans": Arsenal Fan TV, football fandom and banter in the new media era. Sport in Society, 24(6),		analysis	
867–885.		0	
Olesen, M. (2018). #walkouton77: Football fan activism in Premier League. Medi Kultur: Journal		Qualitative content	
of Media and Communication Research, 34(65), 117-137.	G : 1 N . 1	analysis	
Fenton, A., Chadwick, S., & Ahmed, W. (2022, August 17). #EmptyOldTrafford: Why Manchester	Social Network		
United's attempt to recruit global fans may be backfiring. The Conversation.	Analysis (SNA)	N	
Brandão, A., & Popoli, P. (2022). "I'm hatin' it"! Negative consumer–brand relationships in		Netnography	
online anti-brand communities. European Journal of Marketing, 56(2), 622–650.	0		
Almeida, A. (2018). Negative Consumer-Brand Relationships and Brand Anthropomorphism: The	Questionnaire		
Case of Social Media Based Anti-Brand Communities.			

Popp, B., Horbel, C., & Germelmann, C. C. (2018). Social-Media-Based Antibrand Communities		Netnography	
Opposing Sport-Team Sponsors: Insights From Two Prototypical Communities. International		Tremography	
Journal of Sport Communication, 11(3), 339–368. https://doi.org/10.1123/ijsc.2018-0082			
Dessart, L., Veloutsou, C., & Morgan-Thomas, A. (2020). Brand negativity: A relational	Online survey		
perspective on anti-brand community participation. European Journal of Marketing, 54(7), 1761–			
1785.			
Geurin, A. N., & Burch, L. M. (2017). User-generated branding via social media: An examination	Quantitative		
of six running brands. Sport Management Review, 20(3), 273-284.	content analysis		
Morgan, A., & Wilk, V. (2021). Social media users' crisis response: A lexical exploration of social		Qualitative content	
media content in an international sport crisis. Public Relations Review, 47(4), 102057.		analysis	
Chiu, W., Won, D., & Leng, H. K. (2019). The relationship between sport involvement, perceived	Survey		
event prestige, and the intention to attend annual spectator events: Moderating effects of gender			
and past experience. Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics, 31(5), 1405–1421.			
Park, S., Kim, S., & Chiu, W. (2021). Segmenting sport fans by eFANgelism: A cluster analysis of	Survey		
South Korean soccer fans. Managing Sport and Leisure, 1–15.			
Fischer, K. D. (2019). Give the Fans What They Want: A Market Segmentation Approach to Sport	Online survey		
Fans' Social Media Usage			
Rascher, D. A., Cortsen, K., Nagel, M. S., & Richardson, T. (2021). Who Are Our	Online survey		
Fans: An Application of Principal Component-Cluster Technique Analysis to			
Market Segmentation of College Football Fans.			
Fenton, A., Gillooly, L., & Vasilica, C. M. (2021). Female fans and social media: Micro-		Interviews	
communities and the formation of social capital. European Sport Management Quarterly, $1-21$.			
Kunert, J. (2021). The Footy Girls of Tumblr: How Women Found Their Niche in the Online		Interviews	
Football Fandom. Communication & Sport, 9(2), 243–263.			
Toffoletti, K., Pegoraro, A., & Comeau, G. S. (2021). Self-Representations of Women's Sport		Qualitative content	
Fandom on Instagram at the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup. Communication & Sport, 9(5), 695–		analysis	
717.			
O'Reilly, N., Finch, D., Abeza, G., Levallet, N., Nadeau, J., Legg, D., & Foster, B. (2022).	Interview		
Segmentation of Ticket Holders in Minor League North American Professional Sport. Sports			
Innovation Journal, 3, 16–29.			

Fenton, A. (2018, February 11). Social capital, Social Media and football communities—A netnography PhD. Dr. Alex Fenton.			Netnography (Observation, interviews and SNA)
Mousavi, S., & Roper, S. (2023). Enhancing Relationships Through Online Brand Communities: Comparing Posters and Lurkers. International Journal of Electronic Commerce, 27(1), 66–99.	Online survey		
Kaiser, M., Ströbel, T., Woratschek, H., & Durchholz, C. (2019). How well do you know your spectators? A study on spectator segmentation based on preference analysis and willingness to pay for tickets. European Sport Management Quarterly, 19(2), 178–200.	Online survey		
Richelieu, A., & Webb, A. (2021). Strategic sport marketing in the society of the spectacle. Journal of Strategic Marketing, 1–18.		Qualitative content analysis and interviews	
Hook, M., Baxter, S., & Kulczynski, A. (2018). Antecedents and consequences of participation in brand communities: A literature review. Journal of Brand Management, 25(4), 277–292.		Qualitative literature review	
Sharif, A., Sulaiman, Z., & Chaudhry, A. A. (2022). Antecedents of Brand Loyalty Using Brand Personality as a Moderator in Social Media Brand Communities. International Journal of Industrial Engineering & Production Research, 33(3).	Questionnaire		
Stegmann, P., Nagel, S., & Ströbel, T. (2021). The digital transformation of value co-creation: A scoping review towards an agenda for sport marketing research. European Sport Management Quarterly, 1–28.		Qualitative literature review	
Chang, CW., & Hsu, CP. (2022). How to generate customer and firm benefits through online game product and brand community engagement – online and offline perspectives. Journal of Product & Brand Management, 31(8), 1252-1264.	Questionnaire		

Appendix 2: Methodology of the key research reviewed in chapter 3 (Brand equity)

Methodology of the key research reviewed in chapter (Brand equity)			
Study	Quantitative	Qualitative	Mixed
Keller, K. L. (1993). Conceptualizing, Measuring, and Managing Customer-Based Brand Equity. Journal of Marketing, 57(1), 1–22.		Qualitative thought piece	
Simon, C. J., & Sullivan, M. W. (1993). The Measurement and Determinants of Brand Equity: A Financial Approach. Marketing Science, 12(1), 28–52.	Quantitative measure of brand equity		
Kamakura, W. A., & Russell, G. J. (1993). Measuring brand value with scanner data. International Journal of Research in Marketing, 10(1), 9–22.	Quantitative observation		
Srinivasan, V., Park, C. S., & Chang, D. R. (2005). An Approach to the Measurement, Analysis, and Prediction of Brand Equity and Its Sources. Management Science, 51(9), 1433–1448.	Survey		
Yoo, B., Donthu, N., & Lee, S. (2000). An Examination of Selected Marketing Mix Elements and Brand Equity. Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 28(2), 195–211.	Questionnaire		
Ailawadi, K. L., Lehmann, D. R., & Neslin, S. A. (2003). Revenue Premium as an Outcome Measure of Brand Equity. Journal of Marketing, 67(4), 1–17.	Quantitative market data analysis		
Pappu, R., Quester, P. G., & Cooksey, R. W. (2005). Consumer-based brand equity: Improving the measurement – empirical evidence. Journal of Product & Brand Management, 143–154.	Survey		
Konecnik, M., & Gartner, W. C. (2007). Customer-based brand equity for a destination. Annals of Tourism Research, 34(2), 400–421.	Survey		
Brady, M., Croninjr, J., Fox, G., & Roehm, M. (2008). Strategies to offset performance failures: The role of brand equity. Journal of Retailing, 84(2), 151–164.	Survey		
Christodoulides, G., & De Chernatony, L. (2010). Consumer-Based Brand Equity Conceptualisation and Measurement: A Literature Review. International Journal of Market Research, 52(1), 43–66.		Qualitative literature review	
Chen, YS. (2010). The Drivers of Green Brand Equity: Green Brand Image, Green Satisfaction, and Green Trust. Journal of Business Ethics, 93(2), 307–319.	Questionnaire		
Nam, J., Ekinci, Y., & Whyatt, G. (2011). Brand equity, brand loyalty and consumer satisfaction. Annals of Tourism Research, 38(3), 1009–1030.	Questionnaire		
Spry, A., Pappu, R., & Bettina Cornwell, T. (2011). Celebrity endorsement, brand credibility and brand equity. European Journal of Marketing, 45(6), 882 909.	Questionnaire		
Godey, B., Manthiou, A., Pederzoli, D., Rokka, J., Aiello, G., Donvito, R., & Singh, R. (2016). Social media marketing efforts of luxury brands: Influence on brand equity and consumer behavior. Journal of Business Research, 69(12), 5833–5841.	Survey		

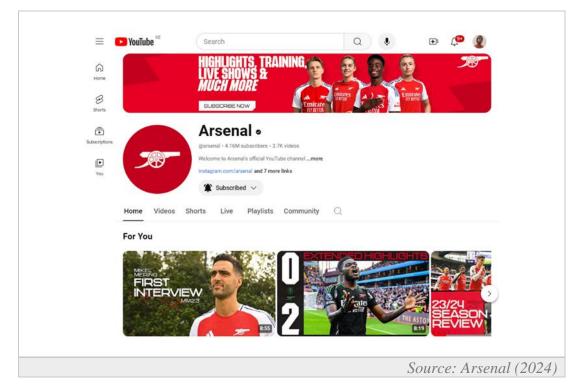
Iglesias, O., Markovic, S., & Rialp, J. (2019). How does sensory brand experience influence brand equity? Considering the roles of customer satisfaction, customer affective commitment, and employee empathy. Journal of Business Research, 96, 343–354.	Questionnaire		
Zahoor, S. Z., & Qureshi, I. H. (2017). Social Media Marketing and Brand Equity: A Literature Review. 1.		Qualitative literature review	
Rossolatos, G. (2019). Negative brand meaning co-creation in social media brand communities: A laddering approach using NVivo. Psychology and Marketing, 1249–1266.			Qualitative and quantitate data analysis
Masa'deh, R., AL-Haddad, S., Al Abed, D., Khalil, H., AlMomani, L., & Khirfan, T. (2021). The Impact of Social Media Activities on Brand Equity. Information, 12(11), 477.	Online questionnaire		
Hoang, H. T., Wang, F., Ngo, Q. V., & Chen, M. (2020). Brand equity in social media-based brand community. Marketing Intelligence & Planning, 38(3), 325–339.	Questionnaire		
Xi, N., & Hamari, J. (2020). Does gamification affect brand engagement and equity? A study in online brand communities. Journal of Business Research, 109, 449–460.	Online survey		
Zollo, L., Filieri, R., Rialti, R., & Yoon, S. (2020). Unpacking the relationship between social media marketing and brand equity: The mediating role of consumers' benefits and experience. Journal of Business Research, 117, 256–267.	Questionnaire		
Lim, JS., Pham, P., & Heinrichs, J. H. (2020). Impact of social media activity outcomes on brand equity. Journal of Product & Brand Management, 29(7), 927–937.			Qualitative and quantitate data analysis
Sagynbekova, S., Ince, E., Ogunmokun, O. A., Olaoke, R. O., & Ukeje, U. E. (2021). Social media communication and higher education brand equity: The mediating role of eWOM. Journal of Public Affairs, 21(1).	Questionnaire		
Brunello, A. (2018). Brand Equity in Sports Industry. Deontology and Journalistic Ethics, 8(1), 25–30.		Qualitative industry analysis	
Manoli, A. E., & Kenyon, J. A. (2018). Football and marketing. In S. Chadwick, D. Parnell, P. Widdop, & C. Anagnostopoulos (Eds.), Routledge Handbook of Football Business and Management (1st ed., pp. 88–100).	Online survey		
Ma, SC., & Kaplanidou, K. (2021). How Corporate Social Responsibility and Social Identities Lead to Corporate Brand Equity: An Evaluation in the Context of Sport Teams as Brand Extensions. Sport Marketing Quarterly, 30(1), 16–29.	Online survey		
Park, JA., Sung, JM., Son, JM., Na, K., & Kim, SK. (2019). Athletes' brand equity, spectator satisfaction, and behavioral intentions. Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics, 31(2), 541–558.	Survey		

Yağız, K., & Özer, L. (2022). Examining the relationships between brand knowledge, brand responses and brand resonance in sports leagues within the scope of consumer-based brand equity. European Sport Management Quarterly, 1–20.	Survey		
Tsordia, Ch., Papadimitriou, D., & Parganas, P. (2018). The influence of sport sponsorship on brand equity and purchase behavior. Journal of Strategic Marketing, 26(1), 85–105.	Survey		
Hattula, S. (2018). The Link Between Brand Equity and On-Field Performance in Professional Sports: An Exploratory Study. Sport Marketing Quarterly, 27(3).		Quantitative analysis	
Maanda, P. M., Abratt, R., & Mingione, M. (2020). The Influence of Sport Sponsorship on Brand Equity in South Africa. Journal of Promotion Management, 26(6), 812–835	Questionnaire		
Charumbira, L. T. (2018). The Integrated Conceptual Framework for Understanding Perceived Brand Equity in Professional Sports Teams. International Journal of Marketing and Business Communication, 32–44.			Free-thought listing survey, semi structured interviews, focus group discussions, and a questionnaire
Cobbs, J., & Groza, M. D. (2022). Reverse effects of sponsorship: Establishing sport brand equity. Managing Sport and Leisure, 27(6), 614–631.	Survey		
Cho, H., & Chiu, W. (2020). Sport nostalgia builds customer equity and future behavior. Marketing Intelligence & Planning, 39(2), 315–328.	Survey		
Shuv-Ami, A., Vrontis, D., & Thrassou, A. (2018). Brand Lovemarks Scale of Sport Fans. Journal of Promotion Management, 24(2), 215–232.	Survey		
Thellefsen, T., & Sørensen, B. (2015). What brand associations are. Sign Systems Studies, 43(2/3), 191–206.		Qualitative literature review	
Gómez, M., Martín-Consuegra, D., Díaz, E., & Molina, A. (2018). Determinants and outcomes of price premium and loyalty: A food case study. Journal of Consumer Behaviour, 17(1), 64–74.	Survey		
Dwivedi, A., Nayeem, T., & Murshed, F. (2018). Brand experience and consumers' willingness-to-pay (WTP) a price premium: Mediating role of brand credibility and perceived uniqueness. Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services, 44, 100–107.	Survey		
Beise-Zee, R. (2022). Brand equity retention after rebranding: A resource-based perspective. Journal of Brand Management, 29(2), 208–224.		Case study	
Rahman, M. M., Rosenberger, P. J., Yun, J. H., De Oliveira, M. J., & Köcher, S. (2023). Keeping the ball rolling: Using the S-O-R framework to investigate the determinants of football fan loyalty. Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics.	Online survey		

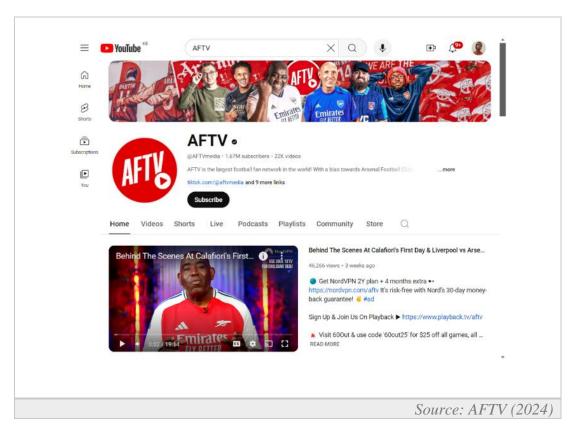
Survey		
Questionnaire		
Online survey		
Online survey		
Questionnaire		
Survey		
Survey		
Online survey		
Questionnaire		
		Questionnaire and interviews
	Case study	
Questionnaire		
Online survey		
Questionnaire		
	Questionnaire Online survey Online survey Questionnaire Survey Online survey Questionnaire Questionnaire Online survey	Questionnaire Online survey Online survey Questionnaire Survey Online survey Questionnaire Case study Questionnaire Online survey

Majewski, S. (2021). Football players' brand as a factor in performance rights valuation. Journal of Physical Education and Sport, 21(04).	Quantitative industry analysis		
Joanna, B., & Zuzanna, K. (2020). The impact of social media on managing the image of the Polish national football team. Physical Culture and Sport. Studies and Research, 87(1), 46–55.	Survey		
Baena, V. (2019). Global marketing strategy in professional sports. Lessons from FC Bayern Munich. Soccer & Society, 20(4), 660–674.			Qualitative content analysis, qualitative literature reviews, interviews and surveys
Massi, M., Piancatelli, C., & Mion, P. (2019). Boosting Football Club Brands Through Museums: The Experience of Mondo Milan: Business & Management Book Chapter IGI Global.		Case study	
Garvin, D. A. (1987, November). Competing on the Eight Dimensions of Quality. Hbr.Org.		Qualitative thought piece	
Borge, S., Smith, M., & Bruun Vaage, M. (2015). The Aesthetics of Football. Sport, Ethics and Philosophy, 9(2), 93–96.		Qualitative thought piece	
Kim, R. Y. (2021). When does online review matter to consumers? The effect of product quality information cues. Electronic Commerce Research, 21(4), 1011–1030.	Quantitative industry analysis		
Yildiz, Y. (2016). A Research On Soccer Teams' Brand Associations. The Sport Journal.	Questionnaire		
Yun, J. H., Rosenberger, P. J., & Sweeney, K. (2020). Drivers of soccer fan loyalty: Australian evidence on the influence of team brand image, fan engagement, satisfaction and enduring involvement. Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics, 33(3), 755–782.	Survey		
Hikichi, K. (2023, August). The impact of social media in building brand equity: Applying netnography to explore brand engagement, brand loyalty and brand advocacy through Facebook and Twitter. University of Warwick.		Netnography	
Grubor, A., Djokic, I., & Milovanov, O. (2017). THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION ON BRAND EQUITY: THE EVIDENCE FOR ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY PRODUCTS. Applied Ecology and Environmental Research, 15(3), 963–983.	Questionnaire		
Zhang, Z., & Patrick, V. M. (2021). Mickey D's Has More Street Cred Than McDonald's: Consumer Brand Nickname Use Signals Information Authenticity. Journal of Marketing, 85(5), 58–73.		Qualitative content analysis	

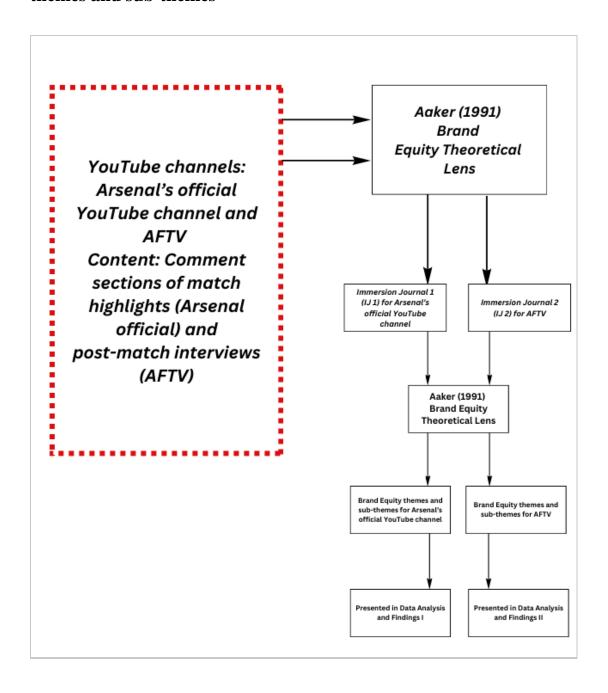
Appendix 3: Arsenal's Official YouTube channel - Homepage



Appendix 4: AFTV's YouTube - Homepage



Appendix 5: Immersion data collection journey for brand equity themes and sub-themes



Appendix 6: Excerpt from Immersion Journal 1 - Arsenal's official YouTube channel, Nottingham Forest 1 Arsenal 0 (Away)

Excerpt from Immersion Journal 1 - Arsenal's official YouTube channel, Nottingham Forest 1 Arsenal 0 (Away)

To me, this comment really diminishes the hard work and overachievement this Arsenal team made. It recognises Arsenal's outstanding season, but diminishes it by associating the Arsenal brand with a club that fails to win when it really matters. Anyways, from a marketing perspective, this is positive brand awareness of the Arsenal brand and negative brand association through the idea that Arsenal is a team that does not often win when it counts. The narrative continues in the next comment which reads 'Eight points clear and still conceded the title to a rampant City side. One of the greatest chokes in the history of the Premier League without a doubt.' Again, as a football fan, such comments should be taken with a grain of salt. They are simply fuelled by negative emotions towards Arsenal from non-Arsenal supporters who perhaps want to feel better about their club's dismal season by trolling a rival club. To me it feels like high school all over again. I do accept good banter but this sounds unreasonable and almost like bullying. It is bullying a football club that has had a tremendous season but fallen short in the last lap of the marathon. Such is the football world at times. Fans who are unfortunately bitter about either something in their life or their football club's dismal performance will always find an easy target to unload their sentiments on. In this case, it's Arsenal, a club who has had a tremendous season with mostly young players like Saka, Odegaard, Saliba, Ramsdale etc... and a young manager in Arteta. They just fell short towards the end, because of various reasons (physically, mentally, injuries to key players etc.) and Man City their rivals, a well-oiled machine with a squad full of world class players like Rodri, Haaland, DeBruyne etc... and a genius world class manager in Pep Guardiola, which steam rolled into winning a treble (The EPL, Champions League and FA Cup). I personally think fans calling Arsenal bottlers, bottle jobs or chokers is rooted in a deep hate for Arsenal or an unloading of negative sentiments stemming

Source: IJ 1

Appendix 7: Excerpt from Immersion Journal 2 – AFTV, Everton 1 Arsenal 0 (Away)

Excerpt from Immersion Journal 2 – AFTV, Everton 1 Arsenal 0 (Away)

With the match not going Arsenal's way, one would suppose that the fans would be disappointed with the team's on-field performances. However, there were mixed reactions. From the onset, an Everton fan shares his/her thoughts about the team. The fan says, 'Everton fan here, I thought we deserved the win today but Arsenal looked dangerous when they got round our box. I think Arsenal have the capabilities to be champions but it's not a certainty. There's a long way to go. It's all about how you bounce back from a poor performance and I think you've got the players to bounce back. Good luck for the rest of the season, I hope you lot win the title over City ... This is a form of brand awareness. Here, the fan is aware of the Arsenal brand as a team who have were good when their attackers are in the defensive area of Everton, a team that has the capacity to become EPL champions, and a team that has the players who can come back to winning ways after a poor quality on-field performance. On the aspect of perceived quality, I come across a fan who says, 'Everton got our number, this is our 3rd straight defeat at their ground. Our build up was slow and lethargic.' For this fan, Arsenal had a low-quality performance because the build play from defence to attack was slow and lethargic. One might imagine this to be a sign of negative perceived quality alone. However, when the fan showcases that he/she has been observing Arsenal's 3 straight defeats at Everton's home ground, Goodison Park, he/she is showcasing subconscious brand loyalty. As I continue scrolling, I notice an interesting comment from a fan. It reads, 'it's not just a defeat but it's the way we lost, the defeat against united didn't feel that bad cause we played well. today's game was total abysmal. the whole team looked like they didn't want to be there.' For this fan, defeat doesn't seem like a big issue. Rather, it is the manner in which the team incurs defeat. Furthermore, for him, defeat isn't really an indicator of a low-quality team. Rather, it is on-field performance. With

Source: IJ 2