

Fan Psychology: Designing Effective Fans Services Online



Issues Addressed

- Introducing a model of fan psychology
- How to maintain user loyalty
- Achieving goals online even when you don't achieve them on the field



Motives driving fan behaviour have been extensively researched by social psychologists for some time. The offline behaviour of fans has been attributed to a set of basic motives, with group affiliation and self esteem being two important extrinsic drivers. A model is presented to explain how these motives serve to increase the level of identification that fans feel towards the target. It is argued that interactive fan services should be designed to satisfy these key motives, thus improving user satisfaction, increasing the fan's level of identification and help the service's primary stakeholders meet their business objectives. Evidence from qualitative research and design case studies is presented.

Keywords: Fan, Target, Level of Identification, Social Identity, Group Affiliation.

1.0 Introduction

Official fansites commonly operate a business model where premium content and fan-related merchandise is pushed at visitors. This hard sales approach frequently drives many fans away to rival unofficial fansites, which are more effective at meeting user requirements. This paper will present a model of the fan lifecycle: how a person becomes socialised into the role of a fan, how this role serves to meet the fans need for group affiliation and for self esteem and how satisfying these underlying needs affects the fans level of identification with the target, a concept which indicates the likelihood of continued support of the target over time (e.g. Wann & Branscombe 1990). This model will form the basis of guidelines in the form of design categories for building effective fan services to be delivered through interactive media. Evidence is presented from social psychology literature and from five focus group sessions with English soccer fans.

1.1 What is a fan?

Social psychology has studied the behaviour of fans (and particularly sport fans) for some time (e.g. Zillman, Wann, Branscombe, Jones). This research has focused on the offline behaviour of fans and has revealed an underlying set of motives (Wann et al. 1999) as well as coining the concept of 'level of



identification', which allows researchers to predict how different fans will react in different situations (Wann & Branscombe 1990, Wann et al. 2001).

For the purposes of this paper a fan is defined as: An enthusiastic follower of a sport or entertainment. The sport, team or person being supported will be referred to as the target.

A fan is more than just a mere spectator. Fans have a psychological bond to the target (Wann 1995, 1997, Wann et al. 2001, Hirt et al. 1992, Wann & Branscombe 1990, 1993), a bond frequently referred to as the level of identification. Generally, the higher the level of identification with the target the more that fan's behaviour is influenced by the target. There is evidence that highly identified fans experience intense emotions related to the performance of their chosen target (Bernhardt et al 1998, Wann et al. 1994, Eastman and Riggs 1994) as well a range of positive long-term psychological benefits (Smith 1989, Branscombe & Wann 1991a). This suggests that many fans see the target as an important aspect of their lives and even as a critical component of their social identity (Tajfel & Turner 1979).

Using this concept of identification with the target, fans can be grouped into two broad categories:

1. Fans with high levels of identification
2. Fans with low levels of identification

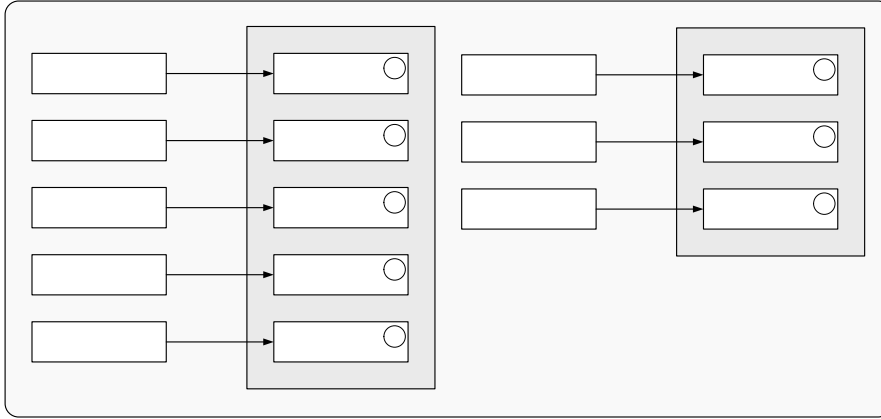
The two groups of fans differ in terms of: emotional involvement, underlying motives and observable behaviour (Wann et al. 2001, End et al. 1999, Wann & Dolan 1994a, 1994b, Wann & Branscombe 1990, Branscombe et al. 1993). In practice, the level of identification is likely to be a continuum ranging from zero to fanaticism, but for the purpose of this paper only the two broad categories will be considered.

1.2 Underlying motives

The experience of fandom serves to satisfy key underlying motives (Wann et al. 1999) either through directly experiencing music, sport or art or through the social identity (Tajfel & Turner 1979) gained through the role.



Fig. 1: Eight motives of fandom (Wann et al. 1999). These motives are ranked in terms of prevalence. The numbers in the top right corners reflect the ranking order (with 1 being the most common motive).



Of the extrinsic motives the two most frequently cited by fans are group affiliation and self esteem (Wann et al. 1999). The self esteem motive is satisfied through affiliation with a socially desirable target (Wann et al 2001, Tajfel & Turner 1979). Adopting the social identity of a fan also provides opportunity for group affiliation (Smith 1989) and thus potentially more positive effects on the fan's self esteem. It is proposed here that the same motives driving offline fan behaviour are active when a fan visits an online resource or other interactive service associated with the target. The fan is seeking to identify and affiliate with the target and with other fellow fans (Wann et al. 2001) as well as wishing to view recorded events, escape in memories of great performances, engage in family fun or bet on the outcome of an event associated with the target (which serve to satisfy the remaining six motives).

**Need for social interaction /
Lack of identity**

Existing fan services often fail to acknowledge the importance of these motives despite the role they play in shaping the fan's social identity (Tajfel & Turner 1979, 1986). Given the gap in design knowledge and the important role these motives play in shaping the fan's social identity, the scope of this paper is concerned with how the effective fulfilment of these two motives needs to be considered when designing interactive experiences aimed at fans.

Need for self esteem

Stress from work and life

**Desire to spend time with
family**

Desire to make money



This paper proposes that attempts to satisfy the underlying motives of self esteem and group affiliation will result in:

1. Increased user satisfaction,
2. Increased return visits and
3. Increased levels of identification

2.0 Offline behaviour

2.1 High levels of identification

Fans with high levels of identification to the target show the following patterns of behaviour:

2.1.1 High degree of group affiliation

There is evidence that the most prevalent extrinsic motive for sports fandom is group affiliation (Wann et al. 1999). Supporting a sports team is to a degree a social activity. Sports fans are likely to gain positive reinforcement from social experiences with other fans as well as through observing the sport and celebrating the target's success. Focus groups conducted with English soccer fans as part of the current research have indicated that the opportunity for social interaction is a key aspect of being a fan, a view supported by a number of authors (Sloan 1989, Smith 1988, Ganz & Wenner 1995, Guttman 1986).

Just as the experiences of fandom may open up opportunities for social interaction and group affiliation, the social group is likely to have a positive effect on the level of identification of its members, increasing the likelihood of continued support. The values, beliefs, attitudes and norms of the group become internalised and this process is known as socialisation (McPherson 1976).

2.1.2 In-group/ out group bias

Research into inter-personal attraction indicates that people like those who are similar to them (Rubin 1973, Byrne 1971, Emswiller et al. 1971). This suggests that fans will be attracted to others who enthusiastically follow the same target. This behaviour has indeed been observed in sports fans (Wann &



Dolan 1994b, Branscombe et al 1993) and is commonly known as an in-group bias (Devine 1989). The usual set of social barriers can seem to evaporate between two perfect strangers once it becomes apparent that both support the same team or player.

The opposite effect also occurs, where fans of a rival team are perceived as different and inferior, and this is known as an out-group bias (Devine 1989). Both these effects appear to be considerably stronger in fans exhibiting high levels of identification (Wann & Dolan 1994b).

2.1.3 **A stable target-related social identity**


Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner 1979) predicts that our perceptions of ourselves are closely related to our perceptions of our role in society. We simplify society into groups, each with their positive and negative attributes. In order to preserve high levels of self esteem we will either view our social group positively or we will seek out a new social identity, which encompasses the positive attributes that we require in order to perceive high self esteem.

Thus fans gain self-esteem from adopting a social identity related to the target. The self-esteem gained from this identity is dependent on the perceived desirability of the target. Thus when a sports team loses, the self esteem of the team's fans is threatened. Similarly, the self-esteem of fans is likely to be threatened if the target is publicly criticised or unpopular with the general population. Fans with the highest levels of identification will experience the greatest threat in such situations (Branscombe et al. 1993). However, the ongoing support of the target is not contingent on the target's performance in highly identified fans (Wann et al. 2001).

2.1.4 **High emotional involvement**

Generally, the higher the level of identification with the target the more that fan's behaviour is influenced by the target. In terms of sports fans supporting a sports team, those who have a high level of identification will experience elation when the team wins and intense negative affect when the team loses (Bernhardt et al 1998, Wann et al. 1994, Eastman and Riggs 1994).

There is also evidence that highly identified fans experience a range of positive psychological benefits as a result of their involvement. These positive



benefits include increased positive emotions, higher self esteem and a reduced incidence of depression (Smith 1989, Branscombe and Wann 1991).

2.1.5 **High levels of loyalty**

2.1.5.1 **BIRGing**

Fans bask in reflected glory following a successful performance by the target (Wann & Branscombe 1990, Cialdini et al. 1976) this may involve being vocal, taunting rival fans or simply buying and exhibiting target related merchandise such as hats and t-shirts. When a particular sports team is successful, more people will buy replica kits, more people will overtly wear the team's branding and more people will admit to being supporters of that team (End et al. 1999). Generally people want to be associated with a successful target.

2.1.5.2 **Coping with social criticism**

When the target is criticised or performs poorly, fans with high levels of identification experience a threat to their social identity. They must justify their affiliation with the target. Fans employ a range of protective mechanisms to overcome these threats.

One mechanism is blasting. This involves attacking and oppressing critics, opponents and rivals in order to discredit their authority and protect one's own identity (Cialdini & Richardson 1980).

Another mechanism is attribution bias. Fans will attribute positive outcomes to internal factors, but attribute negative outcomes to external factors (Wann & Dolan 1994a, Wann 1997). Essentially, poor performances are perceived as bad luck whereas good performances are perceived as skill or talent.

Fans with high levels of identification also engage in biased recollections and predictions. Recollections of past performances are biased towards the positive as are predictions of future success (Wann & Dolan 1994b, Wann 1994a). This may serve to justify current poor performances by the target.

These coping mechanisms are likely to have increased effectiveness when deployed on a group level. Social proof and group consensus serve to increase the level of certainty that the attributions and biases are in fact accurate and justified.



2.2 **Low levels of identification**

Fans with low levels of identification to the target on the other hand display:

- Less group affiliation
- Less emotional involvement
- Less In-group/out-group bias
- Less biased attributions, recollections and predictions
- Less degree of loyalty

Fans with low levels of identification are not terribly loyal supporters. They engage in the following behaviours:

2.2.1 **BIRGing**

Following a positive outcome, fans with low levels of identification will engage in BIRGing similarly to fans with high levels of identification. Essentially this type of fan only exhibits support when the target is successful and popular (Wann & Branscombe 1990, Wann et al. 2001, End et al. 1999). The term 'fair weather fan' is often used to describe this type of behaviour.

2.2.2 **CORFing**

Following a negative outcome, fans with low levels of identification may engage in cutting off reflected failure (Wann & Branscombe 1990, Wann et al. 2001, Cialdini et al. 1976). These fans avoid the social backlash by cutting their affiliation with the target when it performs poorly.

2.3 **Effects of distance and isolation**

In the case of sports teams, geographic location is an important factor affecting the level of identification experienced by fans. Geographical proximity is the main reason for continued support amongst English soccer fans (Jones 1997a) and a strong contributor to continued support in many other sports fans (Wann et al. 2001). This is not surprising given the four main socialising agents of peers, school, family and community (McPherson 1976).



In the case of location based targets it is likely that the target represents a community identity and not just the identity of individual fans. It is this proximity to a social group of fellow fans as well as the geographic proximity to the target which plays an important role in continued support. Fans have access to social resources, which serve to facilitate blasting and biases following a negative outcome. The group also serves to neutralise internal threats. Fans with high levels of identification react more aggressively to CORFing by in-group members than to threats from rival supporters (Branscombe et al. 1994).

The social group acts as a buffer to external and internal threats, protecting its members and encouraging high levels of identification. Isolated fans, who do not have access to such social resources, and who must justify their social identity to a less receptive community will often find it more difficult to obtain the same level of psychological benefits, and are therefore more likely to exhibit low levels of identification, more likely to engage in CORFing, and ultimately more likely to change their social identity.

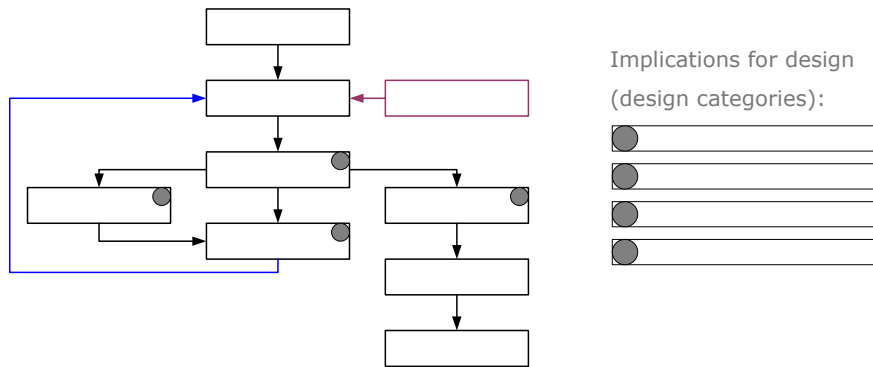


3.0 Reinforcement model of fan behaviour

Three models are presented below, which summarise how fan behaviour is reinforced and how fans are lost when this reinforcement is absent. Implications for design are identified by extracting key behaviours and processes, important in encouraging and maintaining high levels of identification. These implications are listed as design categories next to each component of the model.

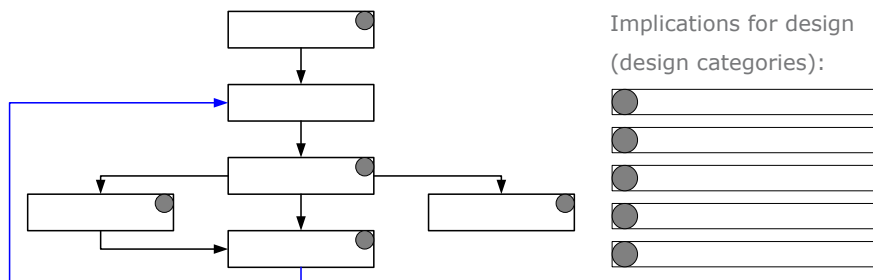
3.1 Fans with low levels of identification

Fig.2: Reinforcement model for fans with low levels of identification and displaced fans.



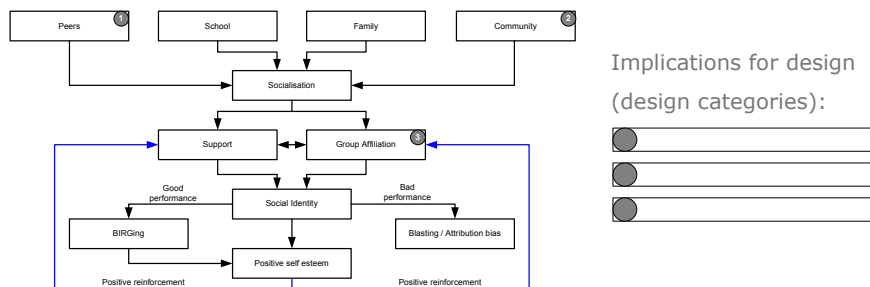
3.2 Fans with geographical proximity to target/social group

Fig.3: Reinforcement model for fans with geographic proximity to the target and high levels of identification.



3.3 Fans with high levels of identification

Fig.4: Socialisation and Reinforcement model for all fans with high levels of identification. The four socialising agents shown are taken from McPherson (1976)



3.4 Refining the Design Categories

A review of the eight categories resulted in the exclusion of 'Maintain positive self-esteem' and 'Facilitate contact with online peers' as these have are covered either explicitly or implicitly by the remaining categories.

4.0 Online behaviour (field studies)

Five focus group sessions were conducted with soccer fans from two English Premier League football teams as part of this research. This was done to examine perceptions towards the existing official websites and seek evidence of the two extrinsic motives (group affiliation and self esteem) affecting fans' online behaviour. The author was particularly interested what this user group expected from the online service, the role played by the social group, the relationship between online and offline behaviour and the requirements of isolated fans. Due to commercial constraints (NDA) full details of the research findings cannot be published.



4.1 Method

Five focus group sessions of 120 minutes were held, each with 8 participants. Fans were recruited from the fan base of two successful English soccer clubs. Participants were controlled for age, sex, website experience and frequency of visit to official club website. In addition one of the five groups was held with fans that were geographically separated from the target. Each session revolved around the following format:

- Discussion of the function and purpose of official websites
- Discussion of existing official site: good and bad practise
- Discussion of rival unofficial sites and other interactive fan services
- Discussion of desired features and content
- Discussion of requirements for isolated fans and the role of the social group (when initiated by participants)

4.2 Results

Analysis of the session data revealed the following findings:

1. Official site is perceived as a direct portal to the target. Its role should be to increase perceived proximity to the target. Existing offerings are not perceived to be achieving this.
2. Onsite marketing and 'hard sales' are perceived as increasing the distance between fans and target,
3. The official website is perceived as responsible for providing access to the target for isolated fan groups (travellers, ex-pats, foreign supporters etc.).
4. There is evidence of how group affiliation serves to promote higher levels of identification. Fans acquire target related knowledge and merchandise in order to gain social status. In-group members compete to be the 'biggest' fans.
5. There is Evidence of BIRGing and blasting behaviours, particularly through group affiliation. The group celebrates positive outcomes or reconciles negative outcomes together.
6. Demand for a range of services that educate fans about target, promote group affiliation, provide opportunity to contribute to key issues affecting the target, increase proximity to target, and support BIRGing, blasting and biased attribution behaviours.



Tellingly, many fans prefer to visit unofficial fansites for many fan-related services. However, the official site is considered a superior channel for all these services given that it affords the closest affiliation with the target itself.

4.3 **Same motives, same psychology**

The views obtained through the focus group sessions are consistent with the social psychology literature based on offline behaviours and their motives. In particular services provided through interactive media are perceived to play a part in satisfying fans' motives of self-esteem and group affiliation, as evidenced through the desired content specified by fans, all of which fits into one of the design categories identified by the reinforcement model. Failing to satisfy these motives and acknowledge the importance of fans not only prevents reinforcement from occurring but also constitutes a threat to social identity if the service is officially affiliated with the target. Any interactive service aimed at fans must aim to satisfy the underlying motives in order to increase user satisfaction, generate return visits and increase the fan's level of identification. Otherwise fans (particularly isolated fans) may be lost.

The fan's level of identification is important for continued loyalty to the target. It appears that attempts to satisfy the intrinsic motives of group affiliation and self esteem through interactive media can result in increased levels of identification amongst fans, similarly to offline analogues. In order for this to be useful for service stakeholders it must also increase user satisfaction and generate return visits.

5.0 **Case studies**

The results of this research were used to make recommendations for the redesign of the official websites of two successful English soccer teams. One of these sites has already been redesigned and re-launched and is performing more effectively than its predecessor on a number of measures.

5.1 **Website monitoring**

Website monitoring statistics are used to compare the re-launched design to the original website. In order to provide a fair comparison, monitoring statistics for October 2002 are compared to the figures for the same period



during the previous season (i.e. October 2001, when the previous version was still online). This serves as a control for periodic variations in fan behaviour over the course of a season. Online behaviours are likely to vary according to stable offline patterns of events (pre-season, knockout tournaments, international games, build up to end of season). Selecting October as the month for comparison allowed the re-launched site to operate for a two month period, providing some time for user behaviour patterns to adjust. Additionally, October is early enough in the season to optimise the comparison, by removing 'end of season' effects. As the season unfolds interest increases or declines depending on the team's performance (e.g. cup final, challenging for the national title etc.).

Website monitoring statistics indicate an increase in the number of unique visitors, the percentage of returning visitors and the percentage of frequent visitors (10+ visits to the website). See table 1 (below).

Table 1: Relative changes in user traffic following a 'fan-centred' redesign of the official website for a UK football club.

Website statistic	% change
Increase in No. unique visitors	39.6
Increase in No. returning visitors	118.4
Increased conversion rate	10.0
Relative increase in conversion rate	56.2
Increase in No. frequent visitors (10+ visits)	150.4
Increase in % frequent visitors (10+ visits)	34.0
Relative increase in % frequent visitors (10+ visits)	168.1

5.1.1 Unique visitors

Overall the new site attracts more unique visitors, meaning that the site traffic has increased. The percentage increase in site traffic for the months studied is 39.6%.

5.1.2 Returning visitors

The number of returning visitors (those who have visited the site in previous months) has also increased since the new site was launched. The percentage



increase in return visitors is 118.4%. However, as site traffic has also increased in general, it is more meaningful to look at return visitors as a percentage of the total unique visitors for the respective months. Whereas in October 2001 return visitors accounted for 17.8% of all traffic, the October 2002 figure is 27.8%. This demonstrates a significant change in visitor's behaviour. It is a 10% absolute increase in conversion rate (visitor to return visitor) or a 56.2% increase in relative terms.

5.1.3 Frequent visitors

The percentage of frequent visitors (10+ visits since monitoring began) for October 2001 was 21.5% whereas the figure for October 2002 is now 35.5%. This demonstrates a significant increase in the in the proportion of site traffic returning regularly. It is a 34% absolute increase in conversion rate (visitor to return visitor) or a 168.1% increase in relative terms.

The same figure for the first half of October 2002 was 35.1%, suggesting that the shift is still in progress. It appears that the behaviour of visitors has been modified as a result of the site's redesign.

5.2 Online poll

In order to validate the website monitoring data with users' subjective opinions, an online questionnaire was placed on the new site, shortly after its launch. Visitors were asked whether they preferred the new site, the old site or whether they were undecided.

Table 2: Results of online poll

<i>Online Poll Options</i>	<i>Response Rate</i>
I prefer the new site	45%
I preferred the old site	34%
I haven't made up my mind yet	21%

The new site was preferred by 45% of the sample. Although this was under half of all respondents, it was the most frequently given answer by 11%.



6.0 Discussion

The social psychology literature suggests that Group Affiliation and Self Esteem are two important motives of fandom. These motives are additionally related to the fan's chosen social identity. Satisfying the motives reinforces this identity or in other words it increases the fan's level of identification with the target. It has been proposed in this paper that these motives can be satisfied through interactive media, that many existing official fan services fail to achieve this, and that the effect of satisfying these motives will be an increased level of identification, increased user satisfaction and an increase in return visits.

There is evidence from the five focus group studies that fans select fan services, which facilitate the management of threats to their social identity, promote feedback and contributions from fans and facilitate reinforcement through BIRGing. Although official services are preferred they are rejected if they fail to satisfy fans' motives. The current research did not employ objective measures of 'level of identification', but this data suggests that fans are attracted to services which in theory increase identification with the target.

Increased satisfaction should result purely from the effective satisfaction of underlying motives. The redesigned website case study is providing fans with a close relationship with the target and with other fans, whereas the previous design was not. The online poll data suggests that overall fans prefer the new service.

The new service shows substantial increases in both return visitors and regular (10+) visitors according to the website's monitoring software. This indicates that the design categories leveraged from the fan models presented in this paper serve as a useful tool for designing effective fan services for interactive media.

An increase in UK Internet penetration and worldwide media coverage of soccer over the comparison period (Oct 01 to Oct 02) for the case study is likely to have affected online user behaviour in this domain. Overall web usage may have increased and contributed holistically to the increase in visitors to the site. However, this would not account for the increase in return visits. An increase in global media coverage could be a variable contributing to the increase in site performance. Prior to re-launch, the World Cup commanded a significant portion of global media attention, thereby facilitating



a newfound or renewed interest in particular players and their respective club teams.

The six design categories (or top-level requirements) for any interactive fan service concerned with building and maintaining its user base are:

1. Create online proximity to the target
2. Build social identity
3. Facilitate BIRGing
4. Facilitate blasting/attribution bias
5. Create online community
6. Promote and facilitate group affiliation

Fans with low levels of identification will be lost when the target is no longer socially desirable. The fan no longer perceives the social identity as positive and desirable. The purpose of employing the specified design categories is to systematically engineer experiences where the social identity is perceived as positive and ultimately reinforced despite the target's general unpopularity. This is partly done through affiliation with the target (categories 1-4) and partly through affiliation with a social group (Categories 2-6).

It is clear that the role played by a social group in maintaining fan loyalty is an extremely important one. The group serves to protect the social identity of its members against potential threats, to increase the positive benefits of being a fan by providing social interaction and group affiliation, and ultimately to increase the level of identification with the target. The group's values, beliefs, attitudes and norms become internalised.

The research indicates one key finding above all others. The mechanisms which serve to satisfy fans' subjective needs also serve to reinforce the social identity associated with being a fan of a particular target. An isolated fan may seek an in-group to satisfy their extrinsic motives. A website that provides this, not only satisfies the motive, but also provides a mechanism which will reinforce that person's adopted social identity, making the fan seek closer affiliation with the target, perhaps by purchasing more merchandise and signing up for more premium services. Similarly satisfying a fan's motive for high self-esteem will strengthen their affiliation to the target.



This strategy of increasing the level of identification in fans creates a stable and loyal user base, which becomes the receptive audience of new online material, services and premium products.

6.1 **Future Considerations : Non sports fans**

The theory presented in this paper is derived from research into the behaviour of sports fans. To what extent can the findings be applied to other types of fans such as movie or music fans? The importance of geographical location becomes less clear with targets that are not associated with a particular city or region. The role of group affiliation is also likely to differ between hardcore football supporters and fans of a particular actor or singer.

A person may enjoy a certain type of film or a certain band or singer. It may just be a case of enjoying the artistry or being entertained. However, certain types of music are considered popular and form the basis of various subcultures. These subcultures may be geographically based and are likely to involve group affiliation. Members benefit from high self esteem and a positive social identity. Likewise, certain films or actors have a cult following. It is clearly possible for people to form high levels of identification with types of music and genres of films. The psychological needs being met are similar to those being met through sports fandom. It is likely that interactive media are frequently used by fans to communicate and interact with other fans. It is also likely that the official sites are not being used as effectively as they could be, in their interaction with the fans.

6.2 **Future Considerations - Non sports fans**

This paper has also concentrated on the role played by group affiliation and self esteem in guiding the behaviour of fans. It is argued that there is scope to address all eight motives of fandom proposed by Wann et al. 1999. The role played by some of the remaining motives (e.g. aesthetic, escape) in shaping the level of identification that fans feel towards the target is not yet clear. However, satisfying any motive that initially attracts fans to the target will lead to positive affect and reinforcement.

For example if a father goes to a baseball game every week primarily to spend time with his two sons who adore the sport, then it is the 'family' motive (Wann et al. 1999), which is driving his behaviour. Whereas his sons



may visit the baseball team's official site regularly, attracting the father might involve designing a family feature that involves both the father and the sons interacting with the site simultaneously. It is this shared time with his children that is important to the father and not the content on, or interaction with the site itself. What this example demonstrates is the importance of satisfying the key motives attracting the fans to the target (and hence the site) in the first place. This is something that is not often considered by interactive media design teams.

6.3 **Importance of requirements elicitation**

The psychology behind the model is not in itself anything new, however the underlying principles are not common knowledge amongst digital media developers. Official fansites with underlying financial objectives have attempted to optimise performance through a traditional e-commerce approach. This has not been without success, but equally it has not been without its problems.

The discrepancy between the needs of fans and the services offered by some official websites highlights the importance of requirements definition at the beginning of a design project. The service's stakeholders would perhaps have selected a different strategy had it been clear from the start that fans are a particular type of user group with particular needs.



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