

# What's Up, Mister! An investigation of the team-fan conversational approach

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## Abstract

This paper proposes a research model for investigating the effect on fan satisfaction and fan loyalty of the three dimensions of the customer engagement construct on Mobile Instant Messaging Apps when they are used as Engagement Platforms in a conversational marketing approach. To test the hypotheses, a sequential regression model was implemented. A survey was conducted on 138 fans of a famous football team in Italy that has decided in 2018 to use WhatsApp (Mobile Instant Messaging App – MIM) to allow fans to communicate directly with football players. A regression model was performed to evaluate the relationships between fan engagement, satisfaction and loyalty. The results highlight the importance of emotional engagement on fan satisfaction and the role of behavioural engagement through the use of WhatsApp for enhancing fan commitment. Fans who are engaged and more satisfied thanks to the use of MIM apps can be ambassadors for the sport brand thus affecting the fan behaviour-based relationship performance and the support to the team. For this reason, sports team managers need to consider the MIM app as a tool that can increase fan engagement.

*Keywords:* fan engagement, mobile instant messaging, conversational marketing, digital engagement platform, fan relational management, sport teams.

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## Riassunto

Questo articolo indaga l'effetto sulla soddisfazione e sulla fedeltà dei fan delle tre dimensioni del coinvolgimento del fan sulle app di messaggistica istantanea mobile quando vengono utilizzate come piattaforme di coinvolgimento in un approccio di marketing conversazionale in ambito sportivo. Per testare le ipotesi è stato implementato un modello di regressione sequenziale. È stato condotto un sondaggio sui tifosi di una famosa squadra di calcio italiana che, negli ultimi anni ha deciso di utilizzare WhatsApp (MIM) per consentire ai tifosi di comunicare direttamente con i calciatori. I risultati evidenziano l'importanza del coinvolgimento emotivo sulla soddisfazione dei fan e il ruolo del coinvolgimento comportamentale attraverso l'uso di WhatsApp per migliorare il coinvolgimento dei fan. I tifosi coinvolti e più soddisfatti grazie all'uso delle app MIM possono diventare ambasciatori del marchio sportivo, migliorando le performance delle squadre di calcio quando sono basate sugli investimenti nella relazione con i tifosi. Per questo motivo, i manager delle squadre sportive devono considerare l'app MIM come uno strumento in grado di aumentare il coinvolgimento dei tifosi.

*Parole chiave:* coinvolgimento dei fan, messaggistica istantanea, marketing conversazionale, piattaforme di coinvolgimento digitale, gestione della relazione, team sportivo.

## 1. Introduction

The sporting performance of professional football clubs depends a lot on trust and the ability to create relationships based on transparency and trust with all stakeholders, including fans who support the football team in different ways. Therefore, football clubs must reconcile the footballing identity and the sporting or competitive image of the clubs. In particular, professional football clubs must pay particular attention to communication with their fans and dissemination in forms and ways closest to their targets. In sports marketing, sports teams must find new ways to retain customers by establishing, maintaining, and enhancing fan engagement. For this reason, they need to communicate and engage in dialogue with their customers. To achieve this, sports teams need to employ effective communication platforms. Mobile Media and the Second Screening (SM) are becoming an ideal tool for a continuous two-way dialogue (Tamir, 2020). Indeed, technology is making relational exchanges affordable and more effective for sport managers (Williams and Chinn, 2010). New media channels are able to cultivate relationships between brands and individuals and are playing a crucial role in cultivating these relationships (Filo *et al.*, 2015). In particular, the mobile phone offers many online fan loyalty opportunities (Watkins and Lewis, 2014) that can be

measured as a type of behavioural fan engagement in the mobile communication context. In contrast to other media genres in which the second screening is not related to the content broadcast on the primary screen, sports fans demonstrate an absolute commitment to the primary broadcast when they use the second screening (Tamir, 2020).

Conversational marketing is a topic of recent interest that sees the conversational approach and the feedback-oriented approach as the main lever for driving customer trust (Lo Presti *et al.*, 2021a). New digital engagement platforms such as Mobile Instant Messaging (MIM)<sup>1</sup> may constitute a channel for direct interaction with customers (Marino and Lo Presti, 2018; Lo Presti *et al.*, 2022). In fact, the MIM app, used as a platform for digital engagement, encourages the co-creation of the value and organization of the service through engagement strategies.

Despite the growing interest in customer engagement in sport events, studies in this area are still characterized by limited knowledge of the main construct in terms of the use of Mobile Instant Messaging (MIM) Apps by fans and sport organizations for communication and for fan relationship management. Despite the opportunities of conversational marketing, today little has been investigated regarding the role of the fan/team conversation in sport management through the use of digital engagement platforms (such as instant messaging apps) and little investigation has been made regarding the impact generated by their involvement on fan engagement and loyalty. The literature on sport management has investigated the role of social media in the behaviour of supporters (Stavros *et al.*, 2013; Filo *et al.*, 2015; Li *et al.*, 2019; Na *et al.*, 2019) but to date little is known about the role of conversation in contexts of digital engagement platforms that lead the consumer from involvement to brand/team loyalty. Therefore, understanding the role of customer engagement by means of digital engagement platforms in the transition from lead generation actions to satisfaction and loyalty is a priority for those sports companies who wish to ride the wave of innovation in customer relations. We try to fill that gap by investigating the role of customer engagement through interaction on WhatsApp with the players of a well-known Italian football team. Through this study, we try to understand the impact of the conversation on participation (fan engagement) and on loyalty to the team (fan loyalty) through the use of MIM with the football team. This study aims at providing additional knowledge in the research on fan engagement and e-

<sup>1</sup> Lo Presti and Marino (2018) define the MIM apps used in businesses as «digital engagement platforms» and specifically as «touch point[s] that go beyond purchase and allow[s] individuals to integrate resources and co-create value between each other and with the firm» (Marino and Lo Presti, 2018, p. 683).

fan relationship management, by developing and testing an integrated research model that investigates the influence of customer engagement, when using WhatsApp as an engagement platform, on fan engagement and satisfaction.

This article is structured as follows: a theoretical discussion on customer engagement platforms and fan engagement in conversational marketing research is developed. Then the theoretical model and the research hypotheses are introduced. In the Methodology section, the sample, the method and the technique adopted in the empirical research are presented. Lastly, discussion on research results, implications, limitations and suggestions for further research are proposed.

## 2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

### 2.1. Engagement platforms in conversational marketing

The engagement has become a central objective for public (Lo Presti and Marino, 2020b) and private institutions (e.g., Lo Presti and Maggiore, 2023), but also for sports organizations (e.g., Abeza *et al.*, 2013), seeing as it has been demonstrated that an engaged fan is a consumer who is more willing to cultivate relations with the sports brand/organization (Yun *et al.*, 2020). Yadav *et al.* (2023) find that fan-team interaction, social identification and user interface are the most central attributes in the digital ecosystem. These factors can foster digital social engagement.

Digital social media provides an interactive platform for organizations and their consumers (Yadav *et al.*, 2023). In particular, digital engagement platforms (DEP) facilitate a direct relationship with the brand because the customer perceives the utility and the ease of use of the apps on their mobile phones. In the sports ambit, we can see DEP as a “second home screen” that is to say, all those digital devices that give us access to websites, the Internet, and social media where the user can visualize various contents all at the same time on a main screen (typically the television) (Saks *et al.*, 2019). DEP have been studied in the literature in the ambit of the service-dominant logic, the sharing economy and the co-creation of value, in the ICT-driven context and customer relationship management (Vargo and Lusch, 2008; Mustak *et al.*, 2013; Breidbach *et al.*, 2014; Blasco-Arcas *et al.*, 2016; Breidbach and Brodie, 2017; Marino and Lo Presti, 2018; 2019). MIM applications with their characteristics are considered digital engagement platforms (Marino and Lo Presti, 2018). Indeed, with their perceived characteristics of transparency,

access, dialogue and reflection, can support the engagement and conversational marketing activities in the mode of personalized promotional messages, requests for feedback and post-purchase assistance. These instant message applications function as a second screen and therefore as conversational channels useful for customer retention. Like all engagement platforms, they are capable of activating cognitive and above all emotional and behavioural factors that stimulate the subjects to continue using the platform. (Marino and Lo Presti, 2018). The literature on the digital engagement platform has multiplied in recent years. The future research should investigate on its usefulness as a channel in sports management to create involvement and ensure a lasting relationship with fans. This perspective could also help us understand the role of MIM as an engagement platform that impacts the entire customer journey. For example, Lo Presti *et al.* (2020a) studied how instant messaging (chatbots and live chat), through conversation, can follow the customer journey from the initial contact to the closure of the transaction. The literature has shown that the conversation mediated by the digital platform improves the consumer experience and satisfaction during online shopping because they give personalized recommendations similar to shop assistants in offline commerce (Lim *et al.*, 2022). Studies of this type are lacking in the sports field. However, at various times during the football season, the fan needs reinforcement actions that encourage him/her to support the team—such as, for example, feeling part of a group and identifying with the team’s values (Murrell *et al.*, 1992). Even if the academic literature is focalized on the engagement practices in digital contexts through the use of conversation in order to facilitate commerce or to support the consumer beyond purchase, there are still very few studies that explore the potentialities of the MIM apps as engagement platforms for sports organizations and as a way of fostering fan engagement and loyalty. Some studies that investigate instant messaging in the sports sectors have concentrated mainly on the efficacy of Instant Messaging (e.g. WhatsApp) during the collaborative vision of a sports event (Tamir, 2020; Weimann-Saks *et al.*, 2019). Tamir (2020) identifies four main functions in WhatsApp groups during sports transmissions. The first function is about controlling the nature and quality of the transmission on the main screen; because of their strong emotional involvement in the main screen, viewers often use secondary screens to express criticism of the transmission. The second function is to enhance viewers’ skills; the secondary screens allow fans to showcase and flaunt their expertise in games and sports skills. The third function concerns the active role in game management; fans are convinced they can influence the game through superstitions and rituals surrounding the transmissions. Indeed, the simultaneous use of WhatsApp increases their involvement in the game and, consequently, their confidence in

their impact.okThe fourth function concerns the extension of emotions through the celebration of victories and the humiliation of rivals; the second screen has the power to extend the duration of fans' emotional experiences, continuing celebrations on the second screen in the case of victory or expressing frustrations in the case of defeat. Although the literature has dealt with the issue of the use of WhatsApp as a collaborative instrument useful for interpreting sports events and for widening the consumption experience of the fans, it has not yet been investigated as an engagement platform, which could be useful for verifying its efficacy as an instrument for fan relationship management.

## 2.2. Fan Relationship Management

In the field of studies on fan relationship management there is a widespread idea that the fans' participation in the activities organized by the sports teams are linked to the level of engagement and attachment of the fans to their brand-team (Yun *et al.*, 2020). In the studies on consumer engagement there are contributions that show the link between engagement and customer relationship management (Yun *et al.*, 2020). In virtue of this relationship, sport managers have for some time now been directing their efforts more and more towards new and more interactive forms of communication with their fans. In order to guarantee an efficient FRM, it is important to predispose activities bent on creating and maintaining a relationship with the customer such as dialogue, information sharing and transparency, which, over time, is transformed into trust and commitment.

Fan loyalty strategies and the fan-centric approach are two of the characteristics of the FCM (Adamson *et al.*, 2005). Fan engagement, satisfaction and fan loyalty represent a measurement of the FCM in so much as they represent the current and potential fans' current and future behavioural intentions. Fans are a particular type of consumer, emotionally adv engaged, and for whom the game and the competitions are adv important (Bernache-Assollant, 2012). Therefore, fans are more loyal, but also have different levels of loyalty that need to be understood. The simple fact that a customer refuses the initiatives of a sports club does not necessarily mean that he does not have desires or relational bonds. Therefore, the behaviour of fans towards the sports organization does not always translate into indicators such as retention, the purchase of team merchandise and the purchase of tickets (Watkins and Lewis, 2014) or repeated use of MIMs and interaction. In virtue of the opportunities offered by the instruments of Fan Relationship Manage-

ment, it is important to understand how the use of interactive and more personalized channels founded on conversational marketing can be useful in guaranteeing the satisfaction and loyalty of the fans and therefore their support over the medium and long period.

Despite the fact that interaction has become a lever for engagement and that social media and digital engagement platforms have become a valid aid for Fan Relationship Management (Santos *et al.*, 2019), there has been still little investigation into the importance of the creation of “reserved” areas for interaction between fans and sports teams with spontaneous and proactive attitudes of support for their sports team.

### 2.3. Theoretical model and hypotheses development

The conceptual foundations of the theoretical framework proposed and the relative hypotheses (Figure 1) are taken from three macro-lines of research: the dimensions of customer engagement (e.g. Van Doorn *et al.*, 2010; Brodie *et al.*, 2013; Vivek *et al.*, 2012), customer satisfaction and customer relationship management (Wang *et al.*, 2004). The latter is expressed through satisfaction, fan engagement and fan loyalty. Knowing, in fact, which engagement factors have an effect on fan satisfaction and on team loyalty after being contacted on MIM helps to understand if and which opportunities can be exploited by the sports clubs through the use of instant messaging as a platform for fan relationship management. Social media in sports can stimulate the emotional, behavioral (Stavros *et al.*, 2013) and cognitive spheres of engagement (Li *et al.*, 2019). Social media can become actual conversation channels that make the relationship between customer and brand more intimate (Sashi, 2012). Thanks to their functional and social benefits, conversations are appreciated by customers for interaction with salespersons and have always been considered a customer contact strategy for call centres (Fielding, 2003). Fielding (2003) indeed wished for a “brand in conversation”, that is, to see the conversations created by organizations as an important part of the brand. In this sense “the brand in conversation is something that represents what the organization really is when dealing with its customers (Fielding, 2003, p. 265).

Conversation is linked to the concept of engagement in social media. Yadav *et al.* (2023) find that “fan-team interaction” is an important influencing factor in the fan network and for information sharing. For this reason, we can presume that an informative and entertaining content transmitted through WhatsApp, that elicits emotions, can generate engagement and wellbeing

and stimulate fan engagement and support for the football team and guarantee loyalty to the sports team. Therefore, we can hypothesize that:

H1: *cognitive engagement has a positive relationship with fan engagement*

H2: *emotional engagement has a positive relationship with fan engagement*

H3: *behavioural engagement has a positive relationship with fan engagement*

Furthermore, it has been shown that involvement is related to fan engagement (Stevens and Rosenberger, 2012; Yun *et al.*, 2020). It was defined by Stevens and Rosenberger (2012) as the level of interest and importance that a fan attributes to sport and therefore how much he believes it is relevant and important for his/her lifestyle. It can be inferred that the more important we consider the team to be, the greater will be the degree of participation, support and collaboration with the sports team. Indeed, for Huettermann *et al.*, (2019), fan involvement can be considered an antecedent of fan engagement. Yun *et al.* (2020), demonstrate that high enduring involvement «fans are more likely to pay greater attention to and exert more effort in processing personally relevant information and engage with the team and the community of fans through interacting with the team to stay up-to-date and discussing events and happenings with others» (Yun *et al.*, 2020, p. 9). As a result, they are more likely to maintain their loyal attitudes than low enduring involvement supporters. High-enduring involvement fans are also likely to develop more strongly held or committed opinions toward their team that are more resistant to persuasion or change. For this reason:

H4: *involvement has a positive relationship with fan engagement*

The most recent literature on customer engagement on DEP has shown that there is a relationship between the construct of engagement and satisfaction (Brodie *et al.*, 2013). In particular it has been shown that emotional engagement is what generates satisfaction in the consumer (Marino and Lo Presti, 2018). Some studies demonstrate that the continued use of MIMs is verified when customer engagement is activated, especially when an enthusiastic participation in the interaction is activated between the customer and the brand/ company through the chat (Marino and Lo Presti, 2018; 2019a). McDonald (2014) showed that high levels of involvement and team loyalty can emerge from increased consumer involvement in the creation and delivery of the service. Moreover, the literature demonstrated that fan involvement by means of, for example, ritual behaviour, has a direct effect on satisfaction and team identification (McDonald, 2014). Fans' social interaction



increases opportunities to exchange knowledge, interact, and add value to the experience; therefore, those more involved in sports communities and participating in rituals may have higher satisfaction and loyalty to teams. McDonald (2014) showed that rituals are often fan-driven and teams must start encouraging and promoting these behaviors because they increase affective and behavioral responses. For this reason, we can affirm that:

H5: *cognitive engagement has a positive relationship with satisfaction*

H6: *emotional engagement has a positive relationship with satisfaction*

H7: *behavioural engagement has a positive relationship with satisfaction*

H8: *involvement has a positive relationship with satisfaction*

Engagement through interaction with instant messaging apps influences the performance of the CRM (Marino and Lo Presti, 2018). Engagement generates a link with the organization through an ever open channel, thus creating a positive effect on WOM and loyalty. The literature demonstrates the mediating role of satisfaction between customer engagement and customer loyalty (Marino and Lo Presti, 2018; Bowden, 2009a, 2009b; Deng *et al.*, 2010). For Bowden (2009a) engagement is an iterative process that commences with customer satisfaction and culminates in customer loyalty. For this reason, and based on previous studies, we can affirm that:

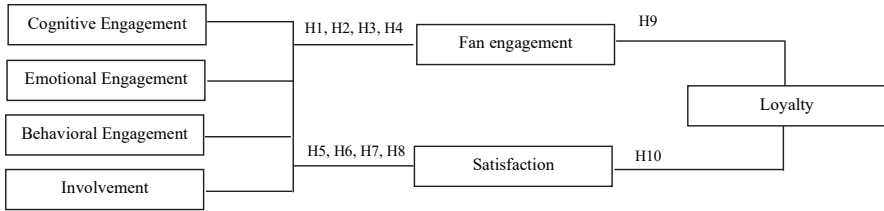
H9: *Satisfaction has a positive relationship with loyalty*

It is supposed that fan engagement has an effect on fan loyalty (Carlson and O’Cass 2012; Yoshida *et al.*, 2014; Santos *et al.*, 2019). Fan engagement through smartphone communication has been shown to have an effect on behavioural loyalty. Fans can develop loyalty while they are using their smartphones. In fact, the more the fans intensify the involvement through the exchange and interaction on smartphones, the more they identify with the sports team and act in support of their heroes (Kang, 2017), therefore:

H10: *Fan engagement has a positive relationship with loyalty*

As shown in Figure 1, the main underlying hypothesis of the proposed model is that the use of MIM for the relationship with fans elicits an engagement that exerts a positive influence both on satisfaction and fan engagement. This perception, in turn, constitutes a significant predictor of post-service intentions both in terms of propensity to use the channel and of positive word of mouth (fan loyalty).

Figure 1 – The hypothesized research model



Source: author’s elaboration

### 3. Methodology

To test the hypotheses, a survey was conducted on the fans of a famous football team in Italy. Recently, in 2018 an Italian football team decided to use WhatsApp (Mobile Instant Messaging – MIM) to allow fans to communicate directly with football players. Indeed, the football team added the messaging application to their social networks to further reduce the distance between players and fans. On certain days of the week and at certain times, players are available at the WhatsApp number to respond to messages from fans, enthusiasts and the curious.

They are, therefore, real private chats in which it will be possible to ask questions, ask for photos, give greetings, and receive answers in real time. In order to test the proposed model, a structured questionnaire, organized into three sections, was adopted using previous research. The online questionnaire survey collected data (138 answers) on users’ engagement with MIMs, satisfaction, and fan loyalty. Moreover, the involvement and fan engagement with the football team was measured. The scales used to measure the constructs in this study were adopted from previous studies to ensure content validity. Items measuring the customer engagement construct were adopted from Hollebeek *et al.* (2014) and Marino and Lo Presti (2018). The sport involvement was adopted from Katz and Heere (2016), while the items measuring fan engagement were adopted from Yashida *et al.* (2014). Finally, the items measuring satisfaction and loyalty were taken from Wang *et al.* (2004). We also measured the authenticity scale from Tsiotsou (2012). Responses were made on a seven-point Likert scale (from 1=definitely disagree to 7= definitely agree).

Google form was used to create the online survey and was administered to the team’s fans between 1 June 2018 and 20 July 2018 and collects only a sample of convenience. The questionnaire was sent to the supporters of the football club for completion. 138 questionnaires were collected for the final

analysis. Of 138 respondents, 56 fans declared to use WhatsApp to chat with football players, while 82 respondents did not use the MIM with the players. 56 fans were also asked to respond to questions regarding customer engagement with WhatsApp, their satisfaction and loyalty. For both groups demographic characteristics were collected. To verify if there are differences between fans using MIMs with football players and fans not using MIMs with sports teams, so as to be able to justify the use of WhatsApp with sports teams, we conducted a sample t-test on both groups. To analyse the hypothesized relationships regression analyses were developed only on the fan group's responses. To evaluate the mediating effects of fan engagement and satisfaction between customer engagement online and offline, and the loyalty to the team and the intention to continue using MIM apps, a sequential regression model (Baron and Kenny, 1986) was implemented.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Description of the Sample

In the sample, there were more men (76%) than women (24%). Most of the respondents are in the age groups of 46–55 years (27%) and 25–35 years (20%). Respondents had a high school diploma (46%) or a university degree (3%). Only 41% of respondents declared to use WhatsApp to chat with football players (Table 1).

*Table 1 – Description of the sample (continue)*

Description	Variable	N.	%
<b>Age</b>	25 – 35	28	20
	36 – 45	19	14
	46 – 55	37	27
	56 – 65	25	18
	< 25	18	13
	> 65	11	8
	Total	138	100
<b>Gender</b>	F	33	24
	M	105	76
	Total	138	100
<b>Education</b>	University degree	54	39
	High school (license)	64	46
	8 <sup>th</sup> grade diploma	18	13
	cell empty	2	1
	Total	138	100

Source: author's elaboration

## 4.2 Regression Analysis

The results of sample t-test shows that the differences are present in two out of three constructs investigated in both groups: fan engagement ( $t(132)=-3.994$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $MMIMuser=5.42$   $SD=1.62$   $Mnonuser=3.73$ ,  $SD=1.53$ ) and involvement ( $t(132)=-2.773$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $MMIMuser=4.9$ ,  $SD=1.68$   $Mnonuser=3.6$ ,  $SD=1.84$ ) while for authenticity there is a slight difference ( $t(132)=-1.908$ ,  $p<0.1$ ;  $MMIMuser=5.3$ ,  $SD=1.56$ ,  $Mnonuser=4.5$ ,  $SD=1.56$ ). For age, level of formation and gender both the groups are similar. These preliminary results demonstrate that WhatsApp with the football player is used only if there is a strong fan motivation. A regression sequence was performed to evaluate the relationships between engagement and involvement and the mediating effect of fan engagement and satisfaction, checking for gender, instruction level and age.

The mobile instant messaging engagement construct and involvement were firstly adv regressed on fan engagement (model 1) and satisfaction (model 2). In the second sequence, engagement construct and involvement were regressed on fan loyalty (model 3). Finally adv, the mediating effect of fan engagement and satisfaction were investigated in models 4 and 5. All regression models are significant (F-statistics with  $p<0.001$ ) and explain a substantial amount of variance (relatively high R2).

Moreover, the models demonstrate low multicollinearity (VIF for each independent variable in all models is smaller than the threshold value of 3). Behavioural engagement ( $\beta=.637$ ,  $p=.054^{**}$ ) by means of MIM apps and involvement ( $\beta=.600$ ,  $p=.008^{***}$ ) with sports teams demonstrate significant effects on fan engagement, as shown by model 1, supporting H3 and H4. Consequentially, hypothesis H1, H2 are not supported (Table 2). As stated in hypotheses 6, only emotional engagement has an effect on satisfaction. The result for this variable was consistent with model 2. Furthermore, the age variable is relevant for customer satisfaction.

In particular, the younger the fans are the more they are satisfied in the use of MIM apps with players. This is consistent with the literature that affirms that the digital engagement platform is a channel appreciated by Millennials (Statista 2018). Regarding the analysis of loyalty models, the results of model 3 and Model 4 demonstrated a significant influence of involvement (respectively  $\beta=.491$ ,  $p=.003^{***}$  and  $\beta=.331$ ,  $p=.065^*$ ) and age (respectively  $\beta=-362$ ,  $p=.003^{***}$  and  $\beta=-405$ ,  $p=.001^{***}$ ). Only H8 is verified. In model 4, a partial mediating effect from fan engagement is present ( $\beta=.268$ ,  $p=.099^*$ ), giving support for H9. Finally, in Model 5 the effect of fan engagement and involvement on loyalty is mediated by satisfaction ( $\beta=.570$ ,  $p=.003^{***}$ ). Age and gender variables also have an important role on the intention to continue

using the MIM apps with football players as the literature confirms (Li *et al.*, 2018; Burk *et al.*, 2016).

## 5. Discussion

The present study intends to fill a gap in the literature concerning the role of conversational marketing tools by sports organizations by means of the use of MIM Apps with fans. Overall, this study has highlighted the importance of behavioural engagement during the use of WhatsApp with football players on fan engagement and the role of emotional engagement on fan satisfaction. This last result confirms the recent results of the literature on the topic (Marino and Lo Presti, 2018).

The results also revealed that involvement and fan engagement are determining for the loyalty to the sports team and for the continued use of the MIM apps in the future. In particular, this is true for young people who are satisfied when using WhatsApp with players. It means that WhatsApp, also in sport management, is capable of giving young fans a more active role, increasing the fan engagement by means of emotional and behavioural engagement.

This study focus on the crucial role of mobile media as a key channel of social experience in a interconnected context. The popularity of WhatsApp and the group conversations that this app facilitates have created a unique experience for fans (Weimann-Saks *et al.*, 2019; Tamir, 2020). This study confirms that the use of mobile media and online social media can affect the degree of the users' engagement and proactiveness (Tamir, 2020; Weimann-Saks, 2019).

The results demonstrate that fans can develop loyalty while using their smartphones with their favorite football players. This research confirms that MIM apps stimulate interaction between the fans, thus creating social bonds that allow mutual support and sustain the sports team with concrete actions (purchase of merchandise, season tickets, brand support, brand ambassador, etc.). This paper represents an addition to the growing corpus of knowledge on relational marketing in the sports sector and on the use of digital services for actions of engagement and fan retention. The results of the research show that instant messaging, used as a platform for fan engagement, has an effect on satisfaction which can generate spontaneous, interactive and co-creative behaviour with the sports team and/or with other fans and favours the sense of belonging to the football brand.

The instant messaging apps therefore have a determining role as an in-

strument of conversational marketing, thus confirming the results of the literature on the issue (Lo Presti *et al.*, 2021b) and can be an important factor in the support of sports teams in addition to the usual events and shows that are set up ad hoc.

From a theoretical perspective this work contributes to the literature on conversational marketing in three ways. Firstly, this research is, as far as we know, the first study to study the role of instant messaging on fan engagement and the satisfaction of the fans when used as an instrument for engagement between fan-sports teams in the context of conversational marketing. Secondly, in the light of what has been said so far, this study enriches the still limited research by investigating the role and importance of contacting fans through direct and immediate channels such as those of MIM apps and of guaranteeing the extension of the fans' football experience well beyond the sports events. These results are also coherent with Hsu (2019) who demonstrated that during the fan journey, for example in the stages of attachment and alliance, specific marketing actions are required, among which: "emphasis the fan community"; "extend the community to non-event settings"; "personalization". In line with this research, our work contributes to furthering the academic knowledge by showing that fan-sports team conversations can create an effective contact for the activation of new and positive experiences for the fans.

Thirdly, the results of the research contribute to enriching the knowledge on relational marketing instruments in the sports sector for an efficient fan relationship management. The proposed investigation, albeit limited to the experience of a single case study, shows how it is possible, starting from the engagement lever through the opportunities offered by instant interaction with sports teams, to plan omni-channel strategies that are more immersive and tailor made. This research can be used as a base for furthering the knowledge on the future of relational marketing in the sports sector. In fact, this study contributes to the literature on sport brands claiming that with digital engagement platforms based on the instant interaction of the fans. The consolidation of the relationship with the sports brand can be greatly increased if leverage is placed on the emotional level and on the satisfaction of the fans created by the interaction with the players. This study is coherent with the extant literature on the consequences of cultivating the brand-customer relationship through engagement (Fournier, 1998).

Table 2 – The results of sequential regression analysis

Variables	Model 1 <sup>b</sup>			Model 2 <sup>c</sup>			Model 3 <sup>d</sup>			Model 4 <sup>e</sup>			Model 5 <sup>f</sup>			
	Fan en- gagement <sup>a</sup>	Stand. Co- eff.	T Value	Sig.	Stand. Co- eff.	T value	Sign.	Stand. Coeff.	T value	Sign.	Stand. Coeff.	T value	Sign.	Stand. Coeff.	T value	Sign.
Constant			.883			1.106			2.597			2.337			2.185	
Cognitive engage- ment	-.118		-410	.686	.276	1.263	.221	.113	.544	.593	.145	.727	.476	-.025	-.149	.883
Emotional engage- ment	-.228		-928	.365	.334	1.793	.088*	.182	1.023	.319	.243	1.404	.176	.028	.184	.856
Behavioural en- gagement	.637		2.048	.054**	.113	.478	.638	.019	.084	.934	-.152	-.644	.528	-.148	-.780	.446
Fan engagement Satisfaction											.268	1.737	.099*	.161	1.257	.225
Age	.160		1.058	.303	-.269	2.345	.029**	-.362	3.312	.003***	-.405	3.781	.001***	-.234	2.353	.030**
Gender	.006		.037	.971	.136	1.294	.210	-.037	-.369	.716	-.093	-.922	.368	-.148	1.792	.090*
Education	.209		2.509	.147	-.119	-.917	.370	.072	.584	.566	.071	.598	.557	.139	1.435	.169
Involvement	.600		2.948	.008**	.079	.513	.613	.491	3.330	.003***	.330	1.961	.065*	.349	2.579	.019***
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.727				.843			.857			.876			.924		

<sup>a</sup>Dependent variable; Model 1<sup>b</sup>=R(.852), F(7.595), p<0.001; Model 2<sup>c</sup>=R(.918), F(15.295), p<0.001; Model 3<sup>d</sup>=R(.926), F(17.083), p<0.001; Model 4<sup>e</sup>=R(.936), F(16.834), p<0.001; Model 5<sup>f</sup>=R(.961), F(24.444), p<0.001; \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

Source: author's elaboration

## 5.1 Managerial implications

It has also strong managerial implications. Fans who are engaged and more satisfied thanks to the use of MIM apps can be ambassadors for the sport brand thus affecting the WOM and stimulating the support of the team. For this reason, sports team managers have to consider the MIM app as a tool that can increase fan engagement. This suggestion is coherent with the recent research results (Yadav *et al.*, 2023) that demonstrate the crucial role of digital interaction for supporting fan engagement in sports ecosystems. Our results add new information to the understanding of the role that information and communication technologies play in facilitating social connections between sports fans and the organizations that cater to them (Yadav *et al.*, 2023). Previous studies find a dynamic link between the brand, consumer, and consumer-brand interaction in the context of an information-enabled sports communication network (Cheung *et al.*, 2021; Yadav *et al.*, 2023). Our research demonstrate also that the use of a conversational marketing tool for the engagement strategy has to keep in mind that the efficacy of its use depends on the level of fan engagement and fan involvement (as demonstrated by the results of the independent sample t-test). It is recommended that sports teams employ a conversational approach in an integrated marketing strategy for communicating with fans through the use of social media. Sport marketers should monitor fan engagement to assess the impact of operational changes (e.g., social media) on the fans' engagement level (e.g. Yoshida *et al.*, 2014; Kang, 2017). This suggests that managers should adopt the instant messaging apps as a relational marketing instrument as it is exactly the type of technology that has the emotional and behavioural dimensions as its objective. Companies should use MIM Apps to create emotional and behavioral engagement. MIM Apps help football clubs strengthen their relationship with the fans by guaranteeing support (by word of mouth, collaboration, and sharing on other social networks) and continued use of MIM in the future. Furthermore, football clubs could have better fan monitoring by reducing drop-out. Despite this, the importance of acquiring relational skills, which are only sometimes inherent in those who use the chat with fans, is highlighted. Some skills will be needed: adaptability, relational skills, and empathy.

## 5.2 Limitations and Future Research

Although this study has taken one step forward in understanding MIM for enhancing fan commitment, it has various limitations. First, the customer's



point of view limits its generalizability: The analysis was conducted on very limited sample of customers. This research refers to the sport of football, so for this reason, further research could investigate the potential customer–brand relationships in MIM chats for other sports. Moreover, this study does not investigate MIM Apps as engagement platforms from the firm’s point of view; this limitation can be addressed in future research. Furthermore, this study measures fan engagement without considering the football season, which had already ended in the survey period. These factors may have influenced fan responses.

This study does not investigate the direct relationship between satisfaction with using WhatsApp and the construct of fan engagement. However, the objective of the work was to measure the importance of fan engagement through WhatsApp on satisfaction with the fan engagement construct and, in turn, on loyalty. Luo (2002) suggested that interactivity, information quality, and entertainment in the online context are the basis of user satisfaction and, therefore, user loyalty. According to the theory of uses and gratifications, in future research development, one could verify the relationship between satisfaction with the use of WhatsApp and fan engagement through a structural equation model. In the future, it will be necessary to investigate other case studies that adopt MIM apps to interact with fans to detect the effectiveness of this engagement platform as a marketing channel for fan relationship management. Our research represents the first step in addressing a research approach to conversational marketing in sport management. Furthermore, the proposed model and its results can be helpful in strategic planning for future research in customer relationship marketing.

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