DIGITAL FANDOMONIUM:

Psychology–Based Engagement & Media Strategy in Sports

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Marketing Communications | Brand Strategy | Media Psychologist

INTRODUCTION

OLD SCHOOL PROBLEM

Being a sports fan is not a new concept. What has changed however are the ways in which we identify with and experience sport. Old research on fan identification looked to measure a person's allegiance to a team. There's way more to it now. Sport is far too complex to be measured only as a one-way stream of information.

Sport has evolved into a multidimensional experience. Engagement has become much more personal and intimate due to the integration of social/digital. We now have to look beyond the 'what' and get to the 'why' behind consumer behavior.

NEW SCHOOL THINKING

We need to frame our thinking to one that considers the latest tech innovations and society's interaction with them. Media psychology allows us to study patterns between media consumption and human behavior. From the development of content, to understanding the influence that content has - this mindset forces you to identify the human experience in the context of tech at every stage.

BYPRODUCT

Sport will always have a head seat at the table because of how successful the vertical has been in setting industry standards for how to optimize technology.

Not only is the fan experience amplified through digital interaction, but new streams of revenue can also be generated for all involved.

Whether you're an athlete, team executive, or brand manager, it behooves you to investigate how sport experiences can be boosted using today's media technology.
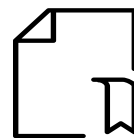
"
Psychology can be a powerful instrument within a creative's toolbox.
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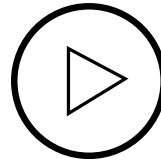
Evolution of Sports Media Consumption

Tracing the activity of sports media and human activity
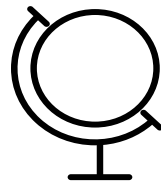
Identification

Psychology Behind Digital Fandemonium, Consumer Behavior, and Loyalty

The 3Es

Emerging Media Strategy for Digital Natives

Brand Building

New Content Ecosystem for Athlete + Corporate Success

ADVANCEMENT OF MEDIA
AND HUMAN BEHAVIOR

When tracing activity in sports media, we see a **pattern in human activity** of wanting to be more fully immersed and engaged with live events.

Sport has evolved to be **much more personal and intimate due to the integration of social/digital media.**

Evolution of Sport Media Consumption

1870s: Induction of sports page into newspapers

1911: Kansas vs Missouri college football game via Western Union telegrams

1921: First sporting event broadcast on radio - lightweight boxing match, Johnny Ray vs Johnny Dundee

1936: First sports television coverage, Summer Olympics

1939: United States first television sporting event, college baseball game - Columbia vs Princeton

1955: First color television sports program, Tennis Davis Cup Match, United States vs Australia

1979: Birth of ESPN going to 24/7 sports programming

2016 +: First professional sporting event streamed via social media (NFL on Twitter); prevalence of OTT subscriptions; emergence of virtual reality sports consumption
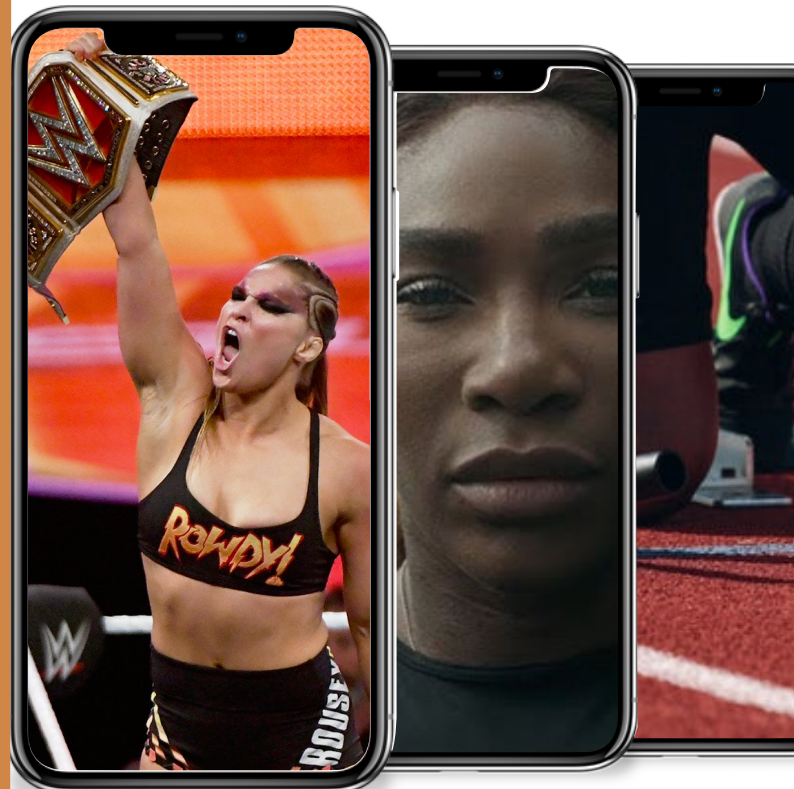
O1.

IDENTIFICATION

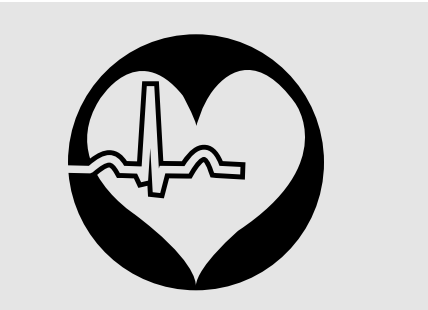Sport fans are not simple spectators.
They're external stakeholders.

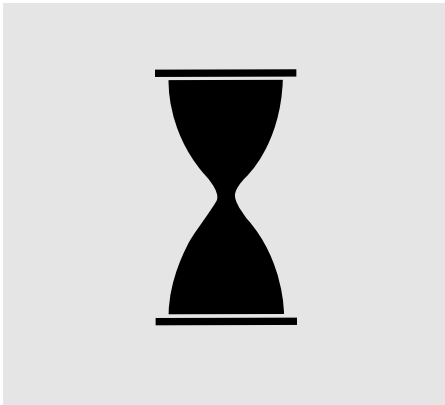Brands publishing content need to understand how commitment, loyalty, and retention are achieved.

3 COMPONENTS OF COMMITMENT:

NORMATIVE

CONTINUANCE

AFFECTIVE

Affective attachment is <u>emotionally based</u>. This stems from the psychological connection one has to an organization that s/he identifies with, is involved in, and enjoys membership in. Consider this **<u>"THE WANT FACTOR</u>"** as in, "I want to watch the game," or "I want that Rams jersey."

AFFECTIVE

Continuance means that a person will behave consistently because of the perceived emotional costs of not acting a certain way. This can be referred to as "**THE NEED FACTOR**," as in "It's game day so I *need* to wear blue so everyone knows I'm representing the Dodgers" or "I *need* to tailgate to be around other Sixers fans."

FOMO (fear of missing out) is a major driver for this motivator, largely because shared, collective experiences are embedded in sports culture. Consistent lines of activity can illustrate this form of commitment, therefore the simple translation could be: "*I need to do X or I will lose Y*."

CONTINUANCE
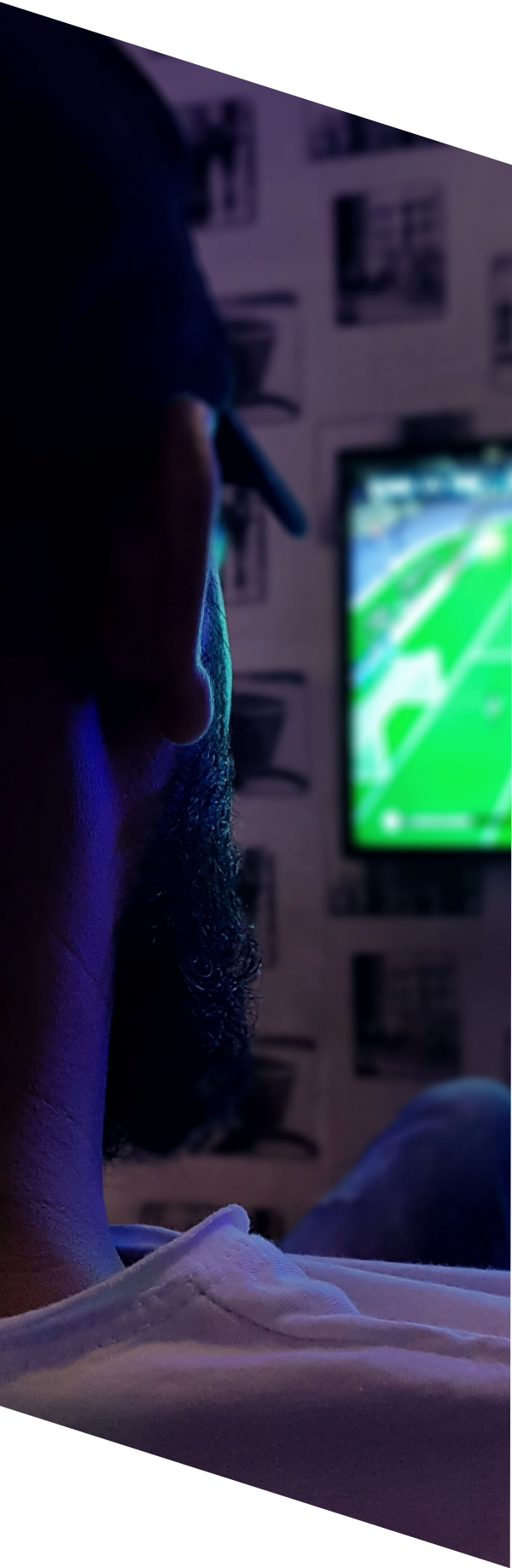
The last component of commitment is normative. This refers to the **OBLIGATION** a person has to an organization, brand, sport, etc. **Elevated senses of responsibility** are shown within this form of affiliation.

This can also be referred to as **"THE SHOULD FACTOR."** As in, *"I should do X because Y is important to me"* or "I *ought* to buy tickets to the game because I need to support my team."

NORMATIVE

"

External stakeholders are considered to be fans that **uphold their affiliation through a series of supportive behaviors**. That is identity utility.

What follows are examples of utility behaviors for modern sport fans, categorized within the 3 components of commitment.

Affective

Customer Recruitment

Stronger Loyalty

Affective attachment (aka the "want" factor) has two utility behaviors - customer recruitment and stronger loyalty.

Recruitment is when a fan positively engages with others about the organization, trying to persuade them to be fans and to become emotionally (and eventually financially) invested in the brand/sport/team/athlete as well.

Engagement and personal relationships are key to the sense of community and sport attachment. As it relates to fan psychology, the expectations are no different.

The interactions between fan-to-brand and fan-to-fan become crucial parts of the consumer's journey and digital experience.

Affective

Customer Recruitment

Stronger Loyalty

The importance of media does not rest in the technology that produces it.

Rather, it's in the empowerment bestowed on consumers through their participation and connectivity with it.

Loyalty is all about maintaining a sense of faithfulness to an entity (organization, product, individual, etc.). With the utilization of social platforms like Twitter, upholding one's loyalty has become mobile and more accessible through participation in digital communities. **Social media repositions consumers as producers in what has been described as a participatory culture**.

By giving consumers the license to become creators, this two-way exchange of information affords fans the opportunity to repurpose material through sharing or creating their own content in digital spaces. While the purpose is to build and sustain a cooperative relationship between sport and consumer, fans of any level will use social media to find likeminded others, consume the information needed, and **become an agent of socialization**. And because fans will often act as external stakeholders on behalf of their favorite team or player, consumers are given a license to recruit and showcase their loyalty at any time.

Therein lies the power of digital technology — boosting traditional media consumption with the ability to repurpose, relive, and engage with content in real time.

Product utilization and resilience to negative information are categorized beneath Continuance (aka the need factor) as utility behaviors and motivation sources. Fans often exhibit what's called **migratory behavior** which means that they'll seek out any and everything that their identity calls for. Sport consumers will go to extreme lengths to get the content they seek because without a game to consume, it's difficult to achieve the extended benefits sport provides (i.e. social connection, distraction, entertainment, etc.).

As a result, **product utilization becomes an important part of identification because it speaks to the multidimensional aspects of not just the consumer, but also the devices used by the fan to consume content.**

Sport experiences are no longer limited to just buying a hat or watching the game at home. The interface of adding second and third screens into the mix positions mobility as an important part of our contemporary viewing experience. A statement like, "I *need* to have my phone near so I can check my fantasy team" reflects the types of modern necessities and subsequent behaviors that are currently involved.

Continuance

Product Utilization

Resilience to Negative Information

Resilience refers to when fans overlook or downplay negative information (or trash talk) about their favorite team or athlete. Consumers _sort_ through information, and _gather_ what they deem necessary.

In essence, fans sift through groups, media, and content...take what they need which serves them best...and leaves the rest behind. Despite being saturated in content, consumers are able to feel a sense of empowerment and a resilience to negativity in digital spaces because of **transportation theory** and **narrative persuasion.**

Like a reader who gets lost in a book, fans forget about the real world around them and are transported into the sport's narrative.

By promoting the products, brands, or teams we like, we in turn are adding our own personal fuel to the sport experience fire as a whole.

Normative

Company/Product Promotion

Willingness to Invest in Company Shares

Company/Product Promotion and a Willingness to Invest in Company Shares are linked to the Normative form of commitment (aka the should factor).

Consumer identities are built from the possessions owned and content consumed. The highly visible nature of sport creates a means to have several items linked to its environment. This can be physical objects — like an official team jersey, signature Jordan sneakers, or a framed ticket stub. Or it can also be a shareable, contemporary digital possession — like a custom avatar, getting Retweeted by an athlete, a sport-identifying selfie, or even a fantasy team.

Regardless of its physical or digital origin, each item is a possession rooted in sport's narrative experience. When a person gives an object meaning, **possessions become a symbol of the content and values essential to one's identity.**

Normative

Company/Product Promotion

## Willingness to Invest in Company Shares

Willingness to invest speaks to the process fans have to actually spend their money. Fans will do what they need to do to get the content and experiences they want. From a behavioral economic perspective, sport consumers will search for more things to purchase in an attempt to promote their commitment, boosting their sense of Self as a result.

Consumers subconsciously make _internal and external investments_, making their affiliated brand/team/athlete the recipient of additional revenue. The more one identifies with their favorite club, the more merchandise they purchase, the more games they attend, and the more supportive behaviors they engage in before, during, and after club events.

EXPERIENTIAL ECOSYSTEM

A Model to Illlustrate the Multidimensional Nature of Fan Identification
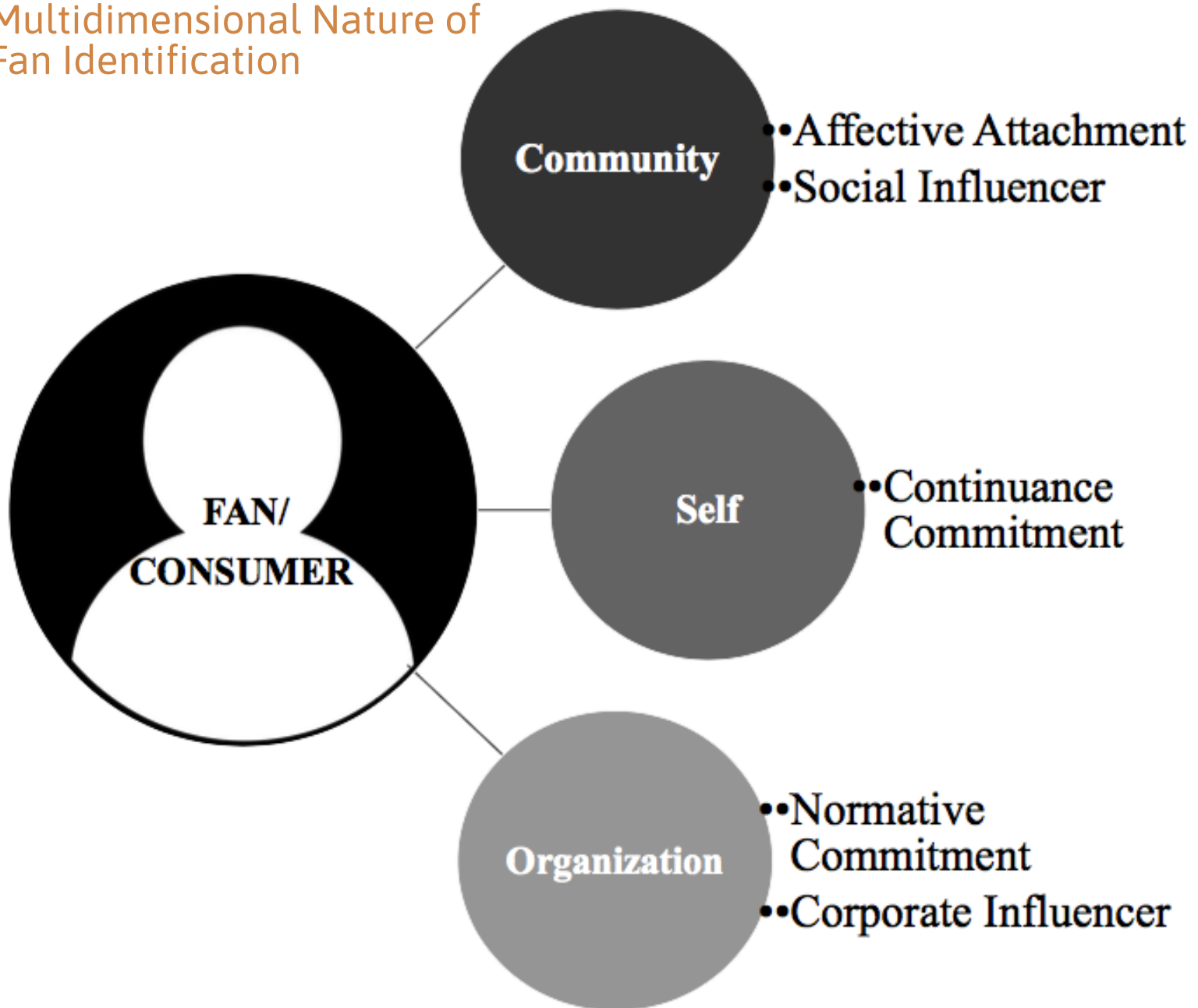
Fan-to-Community represents the emotional, affective attachment a consumer identifies with—often acting as a social influencer.

Fan-to-Self refers to the consumer's personal, individualized needs, linking to the continuance form of commitment.

Fan-to-Organization is attached to the normative elements in identification—noting the larger, corporate influences therein.

IDENTIFICATION TAKEAWAYS

We've reached a turning point in fandom where it's not about storytelling anymore, but *story living.*

Consumers are digitally living out their fandom and using their wallet, time, and emotional investments to make very specific decisions about what type of experiences, content, and platforms they want to use.

Sport fans are not simple consumers. They're *Connected Smart Fans.*

Connected Smart Fans are newly empowered consumers who take advantage of the opportunities provided to them via technology. And these contemporary digital natives stop, note, track, quantify, and share their experiences everywhere they can.
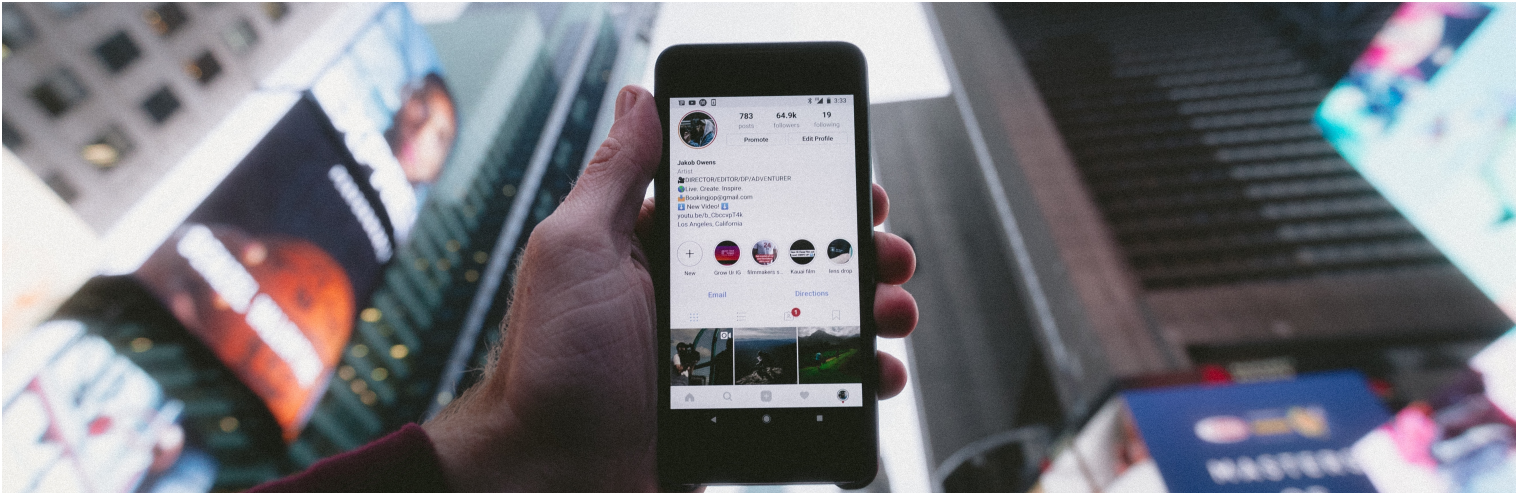
02.

THE 3Es

Emotion, Engagement, and Experience

An Emerging Media Strategy for Digital Natives

The previous section emphasized the importance of psychology in developing a communication strategy. Sport fans are the most loyal, vocal, and obsessed consumer base around the globe. Think about it...sports fans love fact checking so much that if they find any discrepancy in your comments or content, they'll reprioritize their entire day to find the time to tell you just how wrong you are.

Anyone in a position that is concerned with creating a lasting impression among consumers, and/or how their messages are being exchanged, then you should be asking yourselves these types of questions: who am I engaging with, which platform(s) are they on, why, and how do I design content to achieve retention? Using psychology as a lens to consider the wants, needs, and why behind your audience's digital behavior can offer applicable insight, which then can be translated into a business initiative.

Having dived deeply into the concepts of social identity, behavioral economics, and organizational commitment, the following section will detail what I have found to be a solid starting place for developing a creative digital media strategy; and one that I've noted to work particularly well for fanatical sport audiences. This is what I refer to as - **The 3Es: Emotion, Engagement, and Experience.**
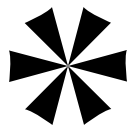
EMOTION
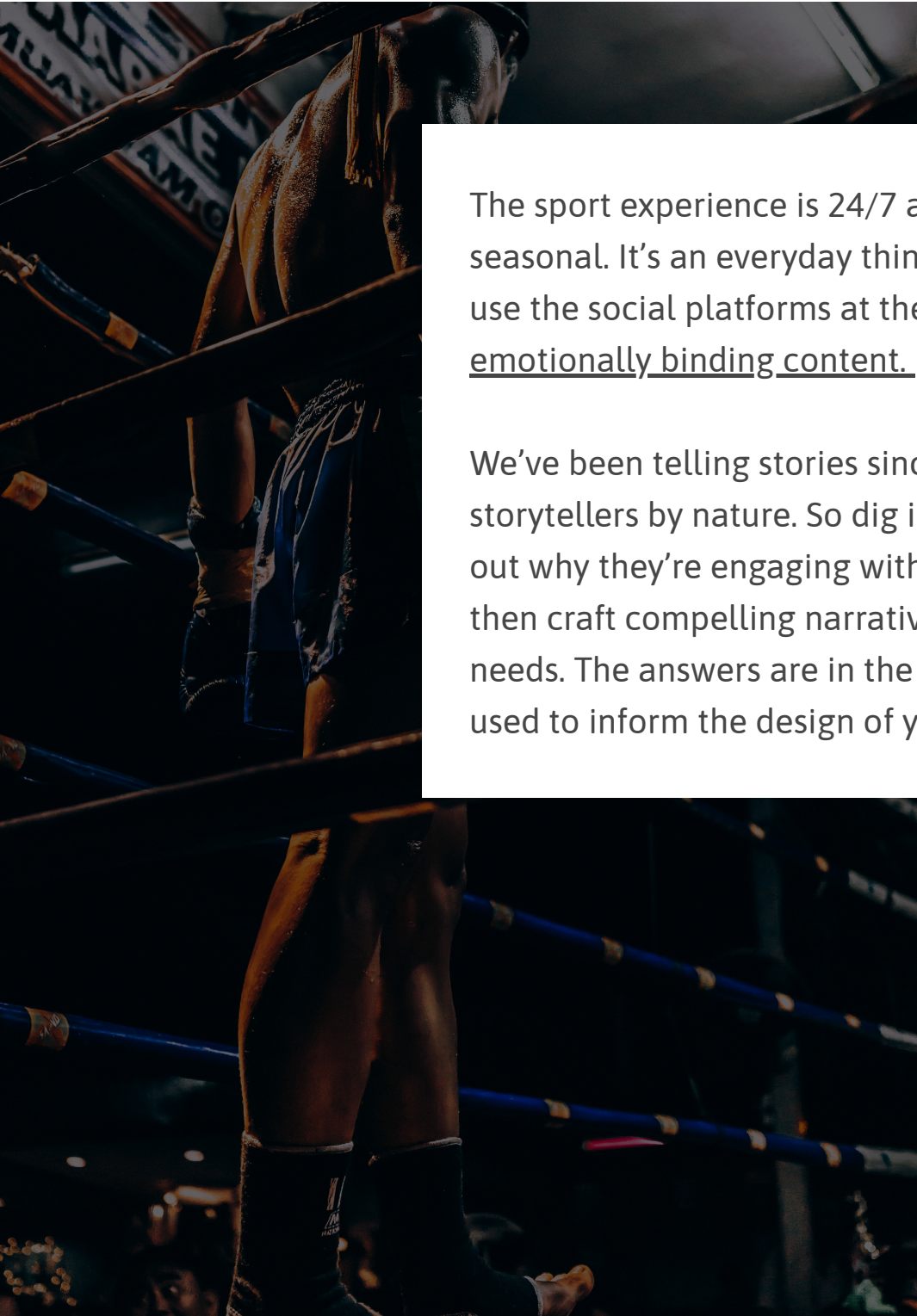
The sport experience is 24/7 as opposed to being seasonal. It's an everyday thing. So companies need to use the social platforms at their disposal to create emotionally binding content.

We've been telling stories since before the wheel. We're storytellers by nature. So dig into your audience, figure out why they're engaging with certain forms of content, then craft compelling narratives that will meet those needs. The answers are in the data and they should be used to inform the design of your creative decisions.

We've entered a new level of social connectivity. But we also must be aware of the marketing trap. The second people feel like they're being sold to or feel manipulated — they become emotionally distant. Instead, **an effective strategy is to create a visual narrative to build an emotional bond.** This is a form of social capital. And when harnessed properly, social capital can increase the market share and profitability of a company through the resources earned in relationships and interactions.

Sport + Story = a visualized human experience.
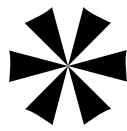
ENGAGEMENT

"Participation creates loyalty as a byproduct of ownership."

Brands and content creators have to **ignite the physical, digital, and virtual landscapes with activity.** Invite opportunities to engage directly with you, and you'll see the Consumer Journey and User Experience come to life.

Social media has provided sport an emotional outlet for fans to react in real time and even produce their own content as a direct response.

Socially active consumers are your digital infantry of support.
They're your external stakeholders with emotional ties to various parts of the sport experience as a whole. Therefore by increasing the contact points in their consumer journey, you're allowing these boosted brand ambassadors the chance to do 3 things:

1. Improve their knowledge with new information
2. Extend their social relationships with likeminded others
3. Let them become a part of the inside joke

NBA TWITTER HASHTAG EMOJIS

#TrueToAtlanta
#WeGoHard
#CUsRise
#Hornets30
#BullsNation
#BeTheFight
#MFFL
#MileHighBasketball

#DetroitBasketball
#DubNation
#Rockets
#Pacers
#ClipperNation
#LakeShow
#GrindCity
#HEATCulture

#FearTheDeer
#AllEyesNorth
#DoItBig
#NewYorkForever
#ThunderUp
#PureMagic
#HereTheyCome
#TimeToRise

#RipCity
#SacramentoProud
#GoSpursGo
#WeTheNorth
#TeamIsEverything
#DCFamily
#NBA
#NBATwitter

Social media, specifically Twitter, has become the go-to digital sports bar. The handheld watercooler. It's where the conversation happens. One professional league that has completely adopted, encouraged, and promoted this idea better than any other is the NBA. As an example — **#NBATwitter**. It's basically the secret password for entering a sports-based, digital speakeasy.

Simply put: it's lighthearted, brings awareness to the games, and highlights the ongoing conversations that continue far beyond the game clock.
By prompting fans to use these, engagement is stimulated and brands each hashtag as a universally verified digital language for the NBA.

Each team has their own custom emoji that gets unlocked when a tweet is used with the team's hashtag. They're all individually-based with references to their own fan clubs, players, and speaks to the personality of the franchise as a whole.

Teams continue to look for ways to engage and reward fans for behaviors beyond attending the game. By rewarding fans with digital currencies (i.e. RTs, comments, likes), **teams can drive greater social media use, enable participation in community events, and strengthen corporate partnerships**. Ultimately when engaged with, fans feel validated through a special kind of official, certified recognition.
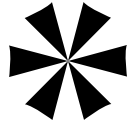
EXPERIENCE

"Turn precious moments into valuable assets."

Products and services come and go, but great experiences have no expiration date. Companies now need to focus on making memories rather than just goods. Give consumers the opportunity to experience something they'll remember or the space to reminisce in an old favorite memory.

Since technology continues to evolve and alter social environments, it's critical to track the consumer trends and conversations occurring in these spaces. The ability to pivot your practices and business initiatives will impact your end result (i.e brand partnerships, metrics, and ROI).

Listen and look into the language, visuals, and devices of your audience. And with psychology as a means to explore your consumer's interactions with digital media, you can translate theory into action.
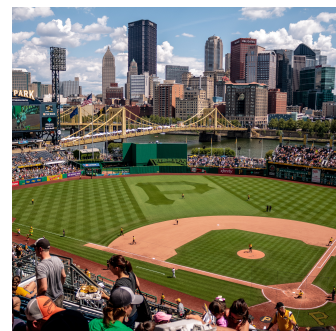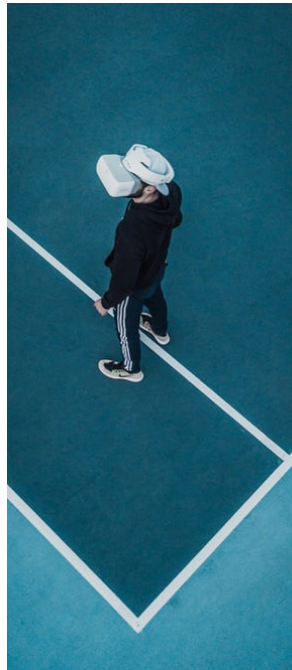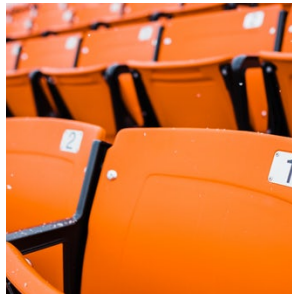
3Es MEDIA STRATEGY TAKEAWAYS

- **Consideration —** creators should be concerned with how messages are being delivered.

- Be **timely —** offseasons no long exist, so you should be prepared to offer authentic, valuable content and information year round.

- **Shoot your shot —** don't be afraid to expand your distribution channels and reach fans where they're actually talking.

03.

BRAND BUILDING

New Content Ecosystem for Athlete + Corporate Success

Use of Communication Technology to Extend Brand Messages and Emotional Value of Sports

Previous sections explored the psychology behind fan identification and developing audience engagement strategies using The 3Es. With that now established, we can put it in context for building brands and exploring how content distribution has expanded into a new tech-based, socially conscious ecosystem.

The aim of all this new communication technology is to give fans the tools to extend the narrative and emotional value of events.

Here are 3 simple points all publishers should consider. First is **discovery**. Why bother making something if no one can find it. Significant content and regular updates with the same intention of relevancy should be a priority. Also consider using an anchor site or hub of information accompanying everything so consumers can dive deeper.

The second is **use**. This speaks to the engagement piece where your audience should be inclined to share, like, RT, comment, and even in some instances produce their own content as a direct response.

The third is **retention**, as in, remembering the experiences you gave them with the added ability to store that memory both *emotionally and digitally* within their own personal social feeds.

Social listening and being data driven are equally important when considering the methods of content creation and distribution. Company's like the WWE have adopted digital as an industry standard, understanding that social media can be used as a tool to grow the brand and create socially conscious content.
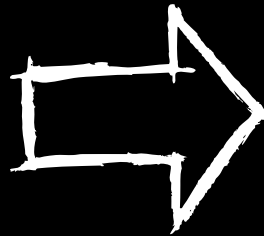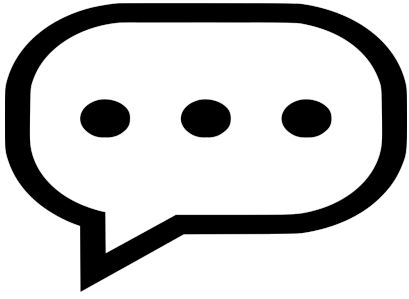
TRADITIONAL MEDIA ➡ DIRECT TO CONSUMER

NETWORK

THEN.   NOW.   FOREVER.

Brands (corporate or independent-based) can capitalize on different forms of distribution. Consider the **head and shoulder programming model.** The live event should be thought of as the head. This is the centerpiece and what you're driving tune-in for.

Now consider everything else you see that is created to promote the live event. Pre-game, post-game, feature stories, fantasy leagues, highlight reels, promos, social media content, etc. —

This is shoulder programming; all the supplemental content - in traditional and digital spaces - that supports, stimulates, and sustains the value of live sports.

HEAD: (LIVE EVENT/ GAME)

SHOULDER:
(Secondary Content)
Pre game
Post game
Feature stories
Behind the scenes
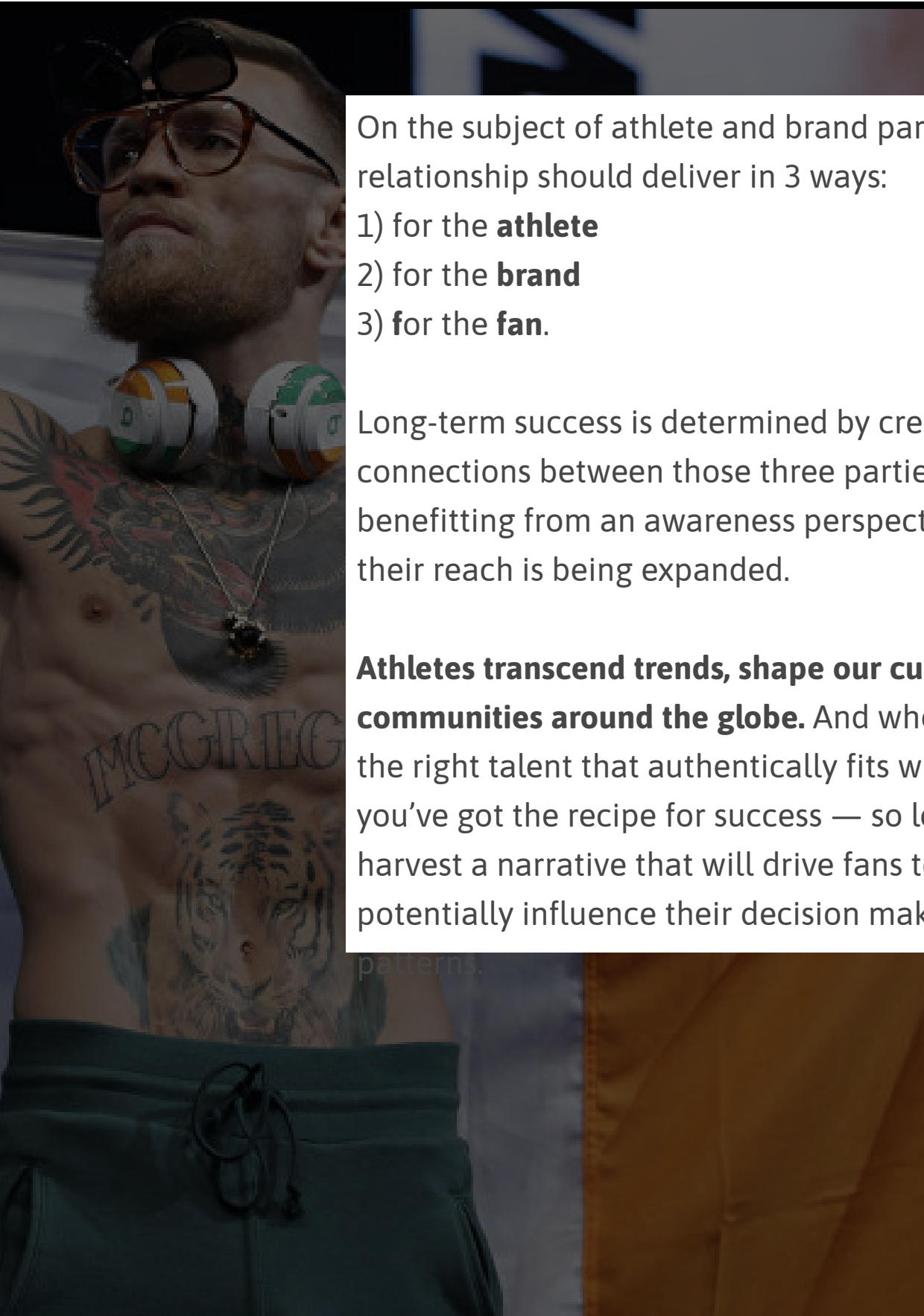### Fantasy leagues
Social Media

Think about it — ESPN transitioned into covering sports 24/7 in 1979. (...but there's not *THAT* many games on...so what are they showing all day?) All of this is complimentary content. It's produced daily and now has the benefit of being seen on second (and sometimes third) screens to meet the evolving needs of consumers.

> **By supporting the actual event, shoulder programming is emotionally anchored in the sport experience and often contains fan favorite material.**

A pre-game "tale of the tape" introducing the competitors talking trash...maybe a post-event podcast or live Twitch stream with some analyst commentary...or how about a YouTube channel dedicated to pro wrestlers out of character playing video games against each other — shoulder programming gives the sport hype and commonly integrates new distribution outlets with real-time fan interaction.

It is important to remember however, that just because you have more options in distribution doesn't mean you get to copy and paste the same content on a bunch of different platforms. This is not a copy and paste environment. There are varying levels of affiliation on different networks and platforms, so you should do your due diligence to study the analytics and see where your audience is spending most of their time and with what kind of content. What's the average view duration? The drop off point? The retention? Are your fans engaging? How? Those are areas you should be concerned with.

On the subject of athlete and brand partnerships, the relationship should deliver in 3 ways:
1) for the **athlete**
2) for the **brand**
3) **f**or the **fan**.

Long-term success is determined by creating authentic connections between those three parties. Each should be benefitting from an awareness perspective and feel that their reach is being expanded.

Athletes transcend trends, shape our culture, and impact communities around the globe. And when you invest in the right talent that authentically fits within your vision, you've got the recipe for success — so long as you harvest a narrative that will drive fans to participate and potentially influence their decision making or purchase patterns.

BRAND BUILDING & CONTENT STRATEGY TAKEAWAYS

Brand strength is **about the person–not the stat sheet**.

Say something. It's that simple. But make sure that what you say is authentic and speaks to who you are.

Aim to **create a narrative — not a product**. Creating a narrative means that you're looking for an ongoing dialog or conversation, and not just a one off.

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Media Psychologist

"A champion for culture and conversation."

@TSingletonSays

Tunisha Singleton, PhD is a marketing communications professional with over 10 years of experience blended in business development, strategic partnerships, creative services and brand management. Like a 1-2 punch, Dr. Singleton is equally seasoned in data insight and marketing strategy with an eye to turn blue sky ideas into tangible results.

In 2017, she earned a Ph.D. in Media Psychology, specializing in fan identification and digital disruption in sports/eSports. She consults within various industries including sports marketing, social advocacy, e-commerce, and immersive technology. In her work with clients, Dr. Singleton has helped with consumer growth and retention, identifying new whitespace opportunities leveraging tech innovation, and ways to refine content strategies in order to meet today's patterns of media consumption and brand engagement.

Dr. Singleton is also an Adjunct Faculty member at Fielding Graduate University in the Media Psychology program.