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Not All Fans Engage Alike: AHP-Based Motivational Priorities and Incentive Factors Across Football Fan Social Media Engagement Groups

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Abstract
Participation in online communities is structurally uneven, and professional football clubs' social media audiences are no exception. This study examines whether participation level can serve as a meaningful organizing principle for understanding fan engagement. Using data from 512 Turkish football fans, participants were classified into Lurker, Observer, and Poster groups based on actual interaction behavior. The Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) was applied to determine how each group prioritizes four motivational dimensions (information, observation, entertainment, and belonging), and five single-item incentive measures examined conditions that would shift participation levels. Lurkers prioritized information, observers prioritized observation, and posters prioritized belonging, with significant between-group differences across all motivational factors. Safe environment and exclusive content were most salient for lurkers, while acknowledgment and voice mattered most for posters. These findings validate the Lurker/Observer/Poster typology in identity-laden contexts and demonstrate that participation stratification reflects qualitatively distinct psychological logics corresponding to each group's motivational profile.

Keywords: Online participation, football fans, analytic hierarchy process, uses and gratifications, engagement typology.

Introduction

When football clubs report follower growth on social media, they are measuring audience size. What those figures cannot capture is whether anyone in that audience is actually participating, and research on online communities suggests that for the overwhelming majority, they are not (Nonnecke and Preece, 2000; Sun et al., 2014). Official club accounts on Instagram, X, and Facebook now command audiences of considerable scale, and clubs have built their fan relationship strategies around these platforms (McCarthy et al., 2014; Vale and Fernandes, 2018). The fan populations inhabiting these platforms are not homogeneous; interaction levels span a wide spectrum from passive consumption to active contribution, and this heterogeneity poses a substantive challenge for both online community research and digital strategy (Ellison et al., 2007; Kietzmann et al., 2011). This variety in online behavior reflects broader differences among fans, who vary in how emotionally attached they are to their club, why they follow it, and what they think about the way it is run (Funk and James, 2001; García and Llopis-Goig, 2020; Wann, 1995).

This asymmetry is not simply a matter of indifference. Research on online communities has consistently shown that participation is stratified rather than binary, and that the factors driving active contribution differ substantially from those sustaining passive observation (Nonnecke and Preece, 2000; Sun et al., 2014). The Lurker/Observer/Poster typology captures this stratification in three broad groups. Lurkers follow community content without leaving a visible trace, observers take part mainly through low-cost actions such as liking, and posters comment and share on a regular basis (Schlosser, 2005; Sun et al., 2014). Studies of brand communities and professional virtual communities have found that these groups are drawn to the community by different things. Posters tend to value trust, shared language, and recognition from other members, whereas lurkers are influenced more by how useful they find the content and by norms of reciprocity (Hung et al., 2015; Liao and Chou, 2012; Mousavi et al., 2017). There is good reason to expect such differences to carry even more weight among football supporters, whose relationship with their clubs rests on deep psychological identification, emotional investment that grows with competitive stakes, and a sense of communal belonging that reaches well beyond any platform (Funk and James, 2001; Wann, 1995). Yet the typology has rarely been applied to sport fandom, and little is known about whether lurkers, observers, and posters among football fans are driven by different motivations.

Part of the reason is methodological. The dominant approach draws on the uses and gratifications framework (Katz et al., 1973), which holds that individuals are active, goal-directed media users who respond to identifiable psychological needs. While this framework has generated considerable insight into fan motivations, including information seeking, entertainment, social interaction, and identity-related needs (Seo and Green, 2008; Trail and James, 2001; Whiting and Williams, 2013), it has not produced a clear account of how these motivations are ordered relative to one another. A fan may value both information and belonging, but rating each independently on a Likert scale cannot tell us which prevails when they come into tension. The Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP), introduced by Saaty (1980), addresses this through structured pairwise comparisons that elicit priority weights reflecting how individuals actually rank motivations, providing precision that conventional scaling cannot offer.

Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) frames participation as a function of perceived costs and returns; passive users make a rational, if implicit, calculation that the rewards of active engagement do not yet outweigh the effort and social risk it requires. Exclusive content, direct

acknowledgment, a sense of being heard, and a safe platform environment can each shift that calculation (Fenton et al., 2023; McCarthy et al., 2014; Vale and Fernandes, 2018). Whether these incentive factors carry the same weight for lurkers, observers, and posters, or whether each group responds to a different configuration of inducements, remains an open empirical question.

This study brings these three lines of inquiry together within a single research design. Using data from 512 football fans who follow at least one official club social media account, it classifies participants into engagement groups based on their interaction behavior, applies AHP to determine how each group prioritizes four motivational dimensions (information, observation, entertainment, and belonging), and examines how five incentive factors vary in their appeal across groups. The findings contribute to the theoretical understanding of participation stratification in online communities, with sport fandom as an empirical context that intensifies the identity and motivational dynamics these communities typically involve.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How are football fans distributed across Lurker, Observer, and Poster engagement groups based on their interaction behavior with official club social media accounts?

RQ2: Do the relative priority weights of social media motivations (information, observation, entertainment, and belonging), as determined by AHP, differ significantly across engagement groups?

RQ3: Do football fans in different engagement groups differ significantly in their responsiveness to incentive factors (reward, safe environment, voice, exclusive content, and being acknowledged) that could increase their social media interaction?

Theoretical Framework

Participation Stratification and Engagement Typologies

Online participation behavior is a multidimensional concept encompassing the intensity, quality, and continuity of individuals' interactions with digital content (Pletikosa Cvijikj and Michahelles, 2013). In the social media ecosystem, fans have moved well beyond the role of passive message recipients; through actions such as liking, commenting, and sharing, they have become active stakeholders in the digital communities they inhabit (De Vries et al., 2012). Yet the literature makes clear that this participation does not occur at the same level across all users, and that meaningful typological distinctions emerge when community populations are examined by their degree of visible engagement (Sun et al., 2014).

Nonnecke and Preece (2000) were among the first to treat lurking not as a failure of engagement but as a legitimate and widespread mode of community membership, demonstrating that the silent majority in most online settings vastly outnumbers those who contribute publicly. This observation reframed a practical puzzle as a theoretical one: if most members never post, what keeps them there, and what separates them from those who do? Schlosser (2005) showed that the decision to contribute is shaped not only by individual motivation but by perceived audience and social risk. Sun et al. (2014) extended this inquiry across multiple community types, identifying perceived usefulness, social norms, and community identification as recurring predictors of whether members remain passive or transition toward active contribution.

The behavioral differences between passive and active community members are not simply a matter of degree. At one end of the participation spectrum, lurkers follow community content regularly without leaving any digital trace, deriving value from the information the community provides while avoiding interaction due to social risk perception or broader reservations about public self-expression (Nonnecke and Preece, 2000; Sun et al., 2014). This characterization has been extended by more recent work: Sipley (2024) demonstrated through a uses and gratifications study that lurking constitutes a purposeful practice driven by motivations such as information verification and community monitoring and should not be reduced to a simple failure of engagement. Observers occupy an intermediate position, making their presence felt primarily through low-cost actions such as liking, which signal engagement without the social exposure that commenting or sharing entails (Schlosser, 2005). Posters, at the active end of the spectrum, interact with club content frequently in all three forms, including commenting and sharing, which carry greater social exposure than liking because they make the member's activity visible to the wider community (Schlosser, 2005). In terms of the consuming, contributing, and creating levels described by Muntinga et al. (2011), this behavior falls mainly within contributing, as posters respond to and spread club content rather than produce original material (Vale and Fernandes, 2018).

Mousavi et al. (2017) and Liao and Chou (2012) demonstrated that these groups operate according to meaningfully different social logics. Posters tend to be driven by interpersonal trust, shared language, and a desire for reciprocal recognition within the community. Lurkers, by contrast, derive value from network ties and community presence without necessarily seeking acknowledgment, and their participation threshold is shaped more heavily by reciprocity norms and perceived usefulness than by the expressive motivations that characterize active contributors. Moving a lurker toward active participation therefore requires addressing a qualitatively different set of psychological conditions, not simply increasing motivation.

Sport fandom complicates this picture in ways that generic online community research has not fully reckoned with. Football supporters bring psychological orientations that have no parallel in less identity-laden communities: Wann (1995) established self-esteem, group affiliation, and escape as foundational motivational dimensions, while Funk and James (2001) traced how individuals progress through stages of awareness, attraction, attachment, and allegiance, each carrying distinct behavioral implications. Fans at higher levels of allegiance exhibit stronger identification, greater emotional investment, and more consistent behavioral commitment, patterns that are likely to manifest differently across lurker, observer, and poster categories than they would in communities where membership carries lower psychological stakes. Existing typologies offer only partial guidance here: classifications based on behavioral engagement with the club do not map cleanly onto the digital participation distinctions the Lurker/Observer/Poster framework addresses (García and Llopis-Goig, 2020; Jaeger, 2021).

Fans now engage with their clubs continuously beyond match days, shaping social identity through digital interactions (Kural and Özbek, 2023). The conversion of passive followers into engaged contributors has become a central challenge in digital community management (Aichner, 2019; Cleland, 2010). Fenton et al. (2023) demonstrated that active participants derive qualitatively different relational benefits than passive observers, generating bonding and bridging social capital in ways that render the lurker/observer/poster distinction not merely descriptive but theoretically consequential.

Social Media Motivations and the Priority Hierarchy

The question of why fans follow their clubs on social media has been approached most systematically through the uses and gratifications framework, which treats media consumption as an active, goal-directed process driven by identifiable psychological needs (Katz et al., 1973). Applied to social media, this framework has proven productive in identifying the functional needs that digital platforms fulfill, with information seeking, entertainment, social interaction, and identity expression emerging as the most consistently documented drivers of engagement across online contexts (Whiting and Williams, 2013). Sport fandom research has drawn extensively on this tradition.

Sport-specific applications have built a substantial body of evidence around the motivational dimensions that drive fan engagement with sport media. Wann (1995) and Trail and James (2001) established foundational motivation scales capturing dimensions including information seeking, entertainment, escape, social affiliation, and team identification. Seo and Green (2008) extended this work to online sport consumption, demonstrating that digital engagement motivations partially replicate and partially diverge from traditional media motivations, while Vale and Fernandes (2018) applied the Consumers' Online Brand-Related Activities framework to football fans specifically, identifying information, entertainment, social interaction, and empowerment as the primary drivers of digital engagement with club content. Posts directly related to club performance and players consistently generate stronger engagement responses than promotional or institutional messaging, suggesting that information and entertainment motivations are particularly sensitive to content relevance (Maderer et al., 2018; Romero-Jara et al., 2023).

Across these studies, four motivational dimensions emerge with sufficient consistency to serve as the analytical core of the present investigation. Information reflects the desire to access news, updates, and insider knowledge about the club. Observation captures the motivation to monitor the club and its community without necessarily contributing. Entertainment addresses the hedonic value of consuming club-related content. Belonging encompasses the identity and community dimensions of fandom that social media can reinforce even in the absence of physical co-presence. These four dimensions are not merely descriptive categories; they represent qualitatively distinct orientations toward the club's digital presence, each implying a different relationship between the fan and the content the club produces.

What this body of research has not adequately addressed is how these motivations are ordered relative to one another. Knowing that a fan endorses all four dimensions on a Likert scale does not reveal which is most influential in shaping behavior, nor does it capture the trade-offs fans make when motivations compete for primacy. The consequences are practical as well as theoretical: a club that assumes these motivations are equally weighted will systematically misallocate its digital resources. The relative priority of motivations is more actionable than their absolute levels, and it is precisely the kind of information that conventional scaling approaches are structurally unable to provide (Stegmann et al., 2024; Vale and Fernandes, 2018).

The Analytic Hierarchy Process, introduced by Saaty (1980), addresses this limitation through a fundamentally different measurement logic. Rather than rating each criterion independently, AHP requires pairwise comparisons that directly express how much more important one motivation is relative to another, producing ratio-scale priority weights that reflect relative importance rather than absolute endorsement. AHP further distinguishes itself by detecting and quantifying inconsistency in respondent judgments, providing a built-in

reliability mechanism with no equivalent in traditional survey approaches, and by facilitating group-level consensus building that is particularly valuable when profiling motivations across heterogeneous fan segments (Goepel, 2018). Together, these properties make AHP a more precise and theoretically appropriate instrument for the present study's core question: not what motivates fans in different engagement groups in absolute terms, but how those motivations are weighted against each other within each group's decision framework.

Incentive Factors and the Social Exchange Perspective

Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) offers a foundational lens for understanding why individuals choose to participate actively in social settings rather than remaining on the periphery. The theory holds that social behavior is governed by a logic of reciprocity: individuals contribute when they anticipate that the returns, whether material, social, or psychological, will outweigh the costs. Applied to online communities, this framework suggests that passive fans are not simply disengaged; they are withholding contribution because the current exchange conditions do not yet justify the effort and social risk that active participation requires.

The literature has identified a set of specific incentive factors that can alter this cost-benefit calculation. Extrinsic rewards, including prizes, discounts, or privileged access offered in exchange for active contribution, represent the most direct application of exchange logic to digital engagement (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). However, the relationship between extrinsic reward and participation is not linear. Self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000) cautions that externally imposed rewards can undermine intrinsic motivation when individuals experience them as controlling rather than informational, a dynamic particularly relevant in fan communities where emotional identification and voluntary commitment are constitutive of fan identity.

The perceived safety of the interaction environment operates through a different mechanism. Nonnecke and Preece (2000) established that social risk, specifically the fear of negative evaluation or conflict, functions as a decisive barrier to participation for a substantial share of lurkers. Sun et al. (2014) corroborated this across multiple community types, demonstrating that perceived anonymity and norms around respectful interaction significantly predict whether passive members transition toward contribution. For lurkers in football fan communities, where tribal identities and strong in-group norms can make dissent costly, a psychologically safe posting environment may be a more powerful lever than any extrinsic reward.

Voice draws on Hirschman's (1970) foundational distinction between exit, voice, and loyalty as responses to organizational decline. Applied to digital fan communities, voice refers to the opportunity fans have to express opinions and influence club decisions. Füller (2010) extended this logic to virtual co-creation contexts, demonstrating that consumers who perceive genuine opportunities to shape products or services exhibit significantly higher engagement than those who feel their input is merely tolerated. For football fans, meaningful voice may address motivational needs that neither rewards nor content quality can satisfy.

Exclusive content operates at the intersection of information motivation and social distinction. Access to behind-the-scenes footage, early announcements, or insider perspectives fulfills the information-seeking needs central to sport media consumption (Seo and Green, 2008; Whiting and Williams, 2013), while simultaneously conferring a sense of privileged

membership that reinforces belonging. What makes exclusive content effective is not simply what it contains but what access to it signals within the fan community's social hierarchy: insider status that publicly available content cannot confer.

Being acknowledged by the club addresses a categorically different set of needs. Kietzmann et al. (2011) identified identity and reputation as core functional building blocks of social media platforms, arguing that fans who feel recognized by the institution they support are more likely to invest further in the relationship. Direct acknowledgment, whether through responses to comments, fan spotlights, or public recognition of contribution, shifts the fan's position from audience member to named participant.

These five factors do not operate in isolation, nor are they likely to carry equal weight across fan segments. Hung et al. (2015) and Kokkodis et al. (2020) demonstrated that the conditions most effective in moving passive members toward active contribution differ systematically from those that sustain already-active contributors. If analogous patterns hold in football fan communities, a segmented incentive strategy targeting each group's specific participation calculus will outperform any uniform approach to digital engagement management (McCarthy et al., 2014).

Material and Method

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the principles of scientific research and publication ethics. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary, and no personally identifying information was collected. Ethical approval was granted by the Social and Humanities Publication Ethics Committee of Van Yüzüncü Yıl University through decision no. 2026/03-12, dated February 12, 2026.

Research Design

This study was designed within a quantitative research framework using a cross-sectional survey model. Cross-sectional surveys aim to describe the attitudes, opinions, behaviors, or characteristics of a group of individuals at a single point in time (Creswell and Creswell, 2017).

Population and Sample

The population of this study consists of fans aged 18 and over who actively support a football club in Türkiye and follow at least one of the club's official social media accounts. Criterion sampling, a non-probability sampling technique, was employed in participant selection (Patton, 2015). Three inclusion criteria were established: actively supporting a football club, following at least one official social media account of the supported club (Instagram, X, Facebook, etc.), and having viewed content on those accounts at least once within the preceding three months (Nonnecke and Preece, 2000). Individuals who did not meet these criteria were excluded through screening questions administered at the beginning of the data collection form.

A power analysis was conducted using G*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2009) to determine the minimum sample size required for the study. Based on a medium effect size ($f = 0.25$), $\alpha = .05$, and a power level of 95%, the minimum sample size was calculated as 252. The 512 participants reached in the present study satisfy this criterion. Demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Variables	***n* = 512**	
Age (*M*)	30.90	
	%	
Gender (Female)	31.3	
Education		
High school or below	26.0	
Undergraduate	69.7	
Postgraduate	4.3	
Level of psychological connection to supported team		
Low	18.2	
Moderate	25.6	
High	31.8	
Very high	24.4	
Platform most used to follow the team		
Instagram	43.4	
X	28.5	
Youtube	16.4	
Tiktok	8.2	
Facebook	2.1	
Other	1.4	
Frequency of viewing team's social media accounts		
Once a month or less	5.1	
A few times a month	10.2	
Once a week	16.0	
A few times a week	27.0	
Every day	41.8	
Interaction frequency on team's social media accounts		
Like	*M* = 2.63 (1-5)	*SD* = 1.45
Comment	*M* = 2.15 (1-5)	*SD* = 1.24
Share	*M* = 1.88 (1-5)	*SD* = 1.10

Table 1 presents the demographic and social media usage characteristics of the sample. Participants had a mean age of 30.90, were predominantly undergraduate-educated (69.7%), and 31.3% were female. Instagram was the most used platform (43.4%), and 41.8% reported viewing team content daily. Among the three interaction types, liking recorded the highest mean score (M = 2.63) and sharing the lowest (M = 1.88).

Data Collection Instruments and Procedure

A structured questionnaire was used as the data collection instrument. The questionnaire consisted of four main sections. The first section included items addressing participants' social media usage behaviors. Items pertaining to the frequency of viewing and using the team's social media accounts were adapted from the social media intensity literature (Ellison et al., 2007). Engagement levels were assessed through three items measuring the frequency of liking, commenting, and sharing on the team's official social media accounts. Each item was rated on a five-point frequency scale (1 = Never, 5 = Every day). A composite engagement score was calculated by averaging the three items, following established practice in online community research (De Vries et al., 2012; Pletikosa Cvijikj and Michahelles, 2013). Although the three items capture behaviorally distinct forms of engagement rather than a single latent construct, their aggregation into a composite index is theoretically grounded in the view that liking, commenting, and sharing collectively constitute a continuum of visible participation intensity (Schlosser, 2005; Sun et al., 2014). Based on this composite score, participants were classified into three groups: Lurkers (M = 1.00; no engagement), Observers (M = 1.01–3.50; moderate

engagement), and Posters (M = 3.51–5.00; high engagement). These cut-off points were established prior to data collection and grounded in the theoretical definitions of lurking, observing, and posting behavior in the online community literature (Nonnecke and Preece, 2000; Schlosser, 2005; Sun et al., 2014).

The second section collected demographic information including participants' age, gender, educational background, level of psychological connection to the supported team, most frequently used platform, and frequency of viewing the team's social media accounts. The level of psychological connection to the supported team was measured across four categories: low, moderate, high, and very high, following Funk and James's (2001) Psychological Continuum Model.

The third section employed the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) to determine participants' motivations for following their team's official social media accounts. AHP is a multi-criteria decision-making technique that establishes the relative importance of alternatives or criteria through pairwise comparisons (Saaty, 1980). Four motivational factors were identified for this study: information, observation, entertainment, and belonging. These factors were derived from the uses and gratifications framework (Katz et al., 1973) and the sport consumption motivation literature (Trail and James, 2001; Wann, 1995; Whiting and Williams, 2013). Participants were asked to compare each motivational factor against every other factor in a pairwise manner using Saaty's (1980) 1–9 scale. A total of six pairwise comparisons were conducted for the four factors.

The fourth section introduced five single-item measures developed by the researcher to identify incentive factors with the potential to increase participants' engagement with their team's social media accounts. The five items addressed the following constructs: reward (extrinsic motivation and economic expectations), safe environment (reduction of risk perception that inhibits participation), voice (fans' desire to participate in governance processes and exercise empowerment), exclusive content (information seeking and the desire for insider access), and being acknowledged (the need to be recognized and valued by the club). These items were derived from the incentive literature reviewed in the theoretical framework (Füller, 2010; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Hirschman, 1970; Kietzmann et al., 2011; Sun et al., 2014). Participants were asked how their level of engagement would change if the supported team's social media accounts featured each characteristic, using a unipolar five-point Likert-type scale (1 = Would not change at all, 5 = Would increase greatly). Incentive factors were measured through single items rather than multi-item scales. This decision reflects the concrete and behaviorally specific nature of each construct: participants were not asked to report on a latent psychological disposition but to indicate how a discrete platform feature would alter their engagement behavior, a task sufficiently unambiguous to support single-item operationalization (Bergkvist and Rossiter, 2007; Wanous et al., 1997). Respondent burden provided an additional rationale; the pairwise comparison task in the AHP section already placed substantial cognitive demands on participants, and the inclusion of multi-item batteries for each incentive dimension risked introducing fatigue effects that would have undermined response quality across both sections of the instrument.

Content validity was assessed through review by three faculty members with expertise in sport management who evaluated the clarity, relevance, and representativeness of each item relative to its target construct. No revisions to item content were required following either the expert review or the pilot study (n = 33), which was conducted with football fans meeting the

study's inclusion criteria to evaluate item comprehension, AHP instruction clarity, and questionnaire completion time. A pilot sample of this size is in line with recommendations for questionnaire pretesting, which suggest that around 30 participants are sufficient to identify comprehension problems affecting a meaningful proportion of respondents (Johanson and Brooks, 2010; Perneger et al., 2015). Data were collected between 15.02.2026 and 27.04.2026. During this period, data were collected via a paper-based questionnaire administered in person to football fans in various physical settings, including university campuses, sports facilities, and fan gathering spaces.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS 31.0 and Python. Normality was evaluated through examination of skewness and kurtosis values, and the data were determined to be normally distributed (Kline, 2011). Descriptive statistics for demographic variables are presented as frequencies and percentages. Means and standard deviations were calculated for continuous variables.

For AHP analyses, a pairwise comparison matrix was constructed for each participant, and priority weights were calculated using the geometric mean method. The consistency ratio (CR) was then computed individually for each participant by dividing the consistency index by the random index for four-criterion matrices (RI = 0.90). Both steps were carried out using a custom Python script written for this study. Participants whose CR exceeded .10 were deemed to have provided inconsistent judgments and were excluded from the AHP analysis (Saaty, 1980). A total of 76 participants (14.8%) were excluded on this basis, with exclusion rates differing across engagement groups (lurkers: 19.9%, observers: 14.1%, posters: 8.9%), leaving 436 participants for the motivational priority analyses. To examine whether motivational priority weights differed across engagement groups, Welch ANOVA was conducted separately for each motivational factor, with Games-Howell tests used for post-hoc comparisons. Group comparisons for incentive factors were conducted using the same approach. A significance level of $p < .05$ was adopted for all analyses.

Findings

This section presents the findings obtained within the scope of the study. Demographic characteristics and social media usage habits of participants are first examined by engagement group, followed by a report of the motivational priorities determined through AHP and the findings pertaining to incentive factors.

Table 2. Demographic and Behavioral Characteristics by Engagement Group

Variables	**Lurkers (*n* = 136)**		**Observers (*n* = 297)**		**Posters (*n* = 79)**	
Age (*M*)	33.57		31.01		25.90	
	n	**%**	***n***	**%**	***n***	**%**
Gender						
Female	57	41.9	92	31.0	11	13.9
Male	79	58.1	205	69.0	68	86.1
Education						
High school or below	37	27.2	81	27.3	15	19.0
Undergraduate	93	68.4	204	68.7	60	75.9
Postgraduate	6	4.4	12	4.0	4	5.1
Level of psychological connection to supported team						
Low	40	29.4	53	17.8	0	0.0
Moderate	47	34.6	84	28.3	0	0.0
High	38	27.9	114	38.4	11	13.9

Very high	11	8.1	46	15.5	68	86.1
Platform most used to follow the team						
Instagram	64	47.1	125	42.1	33	41.8
X	31	22.8	94	31.6	21	26.6
Youtube	25	18.4	46	15.5	13	16.5
Tiktok	10	7.4	20	6.7	12	15.2
Facebook	2	1.5	9	3.0	0	0.0
Other	4	2.9	3	1.0	0	0.0
Frequency of viewing team's social media accounts						
Once a month or less	22	16.2	4	1.3	0	0.0
A few times a month	17	12.5	35	11.8	0	0.0
Once a week	31	22.8	51	17.2	0	0.0
A few times a week	42	30.9	96	32.3	0	0.0
Every day	24	17.6	111	37.4	79	100.0
Interaction frequency on team's social media accounts						
	M	***SD***	***M***	***SD***	***M***	***SD***
Like	1.00	.00	2.86	1.13	4.56	.61
Comment	1.00	.00	2.17	.96	4.09	.70
Share	1.00	.00	1.89	.95	3.33	.98
Overall engagement level	1.00	.00	2.31	.61	3.99	.41

Demographic and behavioral characteristics by engagement group are presented in Table 2. Age means differed across engagement groups, with posters forming the youngest group (M = 25.90) and lurkers the oldest (M = 33.57). The proportion of male participants increased consistently from lurkers (58.1%) to observers (69.0%) to posters (86.1%). Undergraduate degree holders constituted the majority across all groups. The most striking pattern concerned psychological connection: no posters were found at the low or moderate levels, while 86.1% of posters reported a very high connection. All posters reported viewing team content daily (100.0%), compared with 17.6% of lurkers.

Table 3. AHP Priority Weights and Consistency Ratios by Engagement Group

Motivational Factors	**Lurkers (*n* = 109)**	**Observers (n = 255)**	**Posters (n = 72)**	***F***	***p***	**Post-hoc**
	w	***w***	***w***			
Information	.354 (1)	.251 (2)	.217 (4)	163.5	< .001	L>O, L>P, O>P
Observation	.256 (2)	.290 (1)	.222 (3)	77.9	< .001	O>L, O>P, L>P
Entertainment	.202 (3)	.227 (4)	.256 (2)	53.3	< .001	P>O, P>L, O>L
Belonging	.186 (4)	.230 (3)	.303 (1)	124.1	< .001	P>O, P>L, O>L
CR	.050	.035	.039			

Note: Numbers in parentheses indicate ranking within group.

AHP priority weights and consistency ratios by engagement group are presented in Table 3. Prior to analysis, pairwise comparison matrices were examined for consistency, and participants whose consistency ratio exceeded the .10 threshold were excluded from the AHP analysis. This resulted in the exclusion of 27 lurkers (19.9%), 42 observers (14.1%), and 7 posters (8.9%), leaving a total of 436 participants (lurkers: n = 109, observers: n = 255, posters: n = 72) for the motivational priority analysis. AHP priority weights differed across engagement groups. In the lurkers group, information carried the highest priority weight (w = .354), followed by observation (w = .256), entertainment (w = .202), and belonging (w = .186). In the observers group, observation emerged as the highest priority (w = .290), followed by

information (w = .251), belonging (w = .230), and entertainment (w = .227). In the posters group, belonging carried the highest priority weight (w = .303), followed by entertainment (w = .256), observation (w = .222), and information (w = .217). Between-group comparisons revealed statistically significant differences for all four motivational factors (information: F = 163.5, p < .001; observation: F = 77.9, p < .001; entertainment: F = 53.3, p < .001; belonging: F = 124.1, p < .001). Consistency ratios were within acceptable limits across all retained participants (lurkers: CR = .050, observers: CR = .035, posters: CR = .039).

Table 4. Welch ANOVA Results for the Comparison of Incentive Factors by Engagement Group

Incentive Factors	Lurkers (*n* = 136)		Observers (*n* = 297)		Posters (*n* = 79)		*F*	*p*	Post-hoc
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*			
Reward	2.93	1.54	3.75	1.30	3.44	1.49	14.52	< .001	O>L, P>L
Safe environment	4.54	0.77	4.15	1.22	3.16	1.72	26.08	< .001	L>O>P
Voice	4.33	1.03	4.14	1.21	4.52	0.80	5.66	< .01	P>O
Exclusive content	4.28	1.17	4.02	1.28	3.62	1.41	6.35	< .01	L>P
Being acknowledged	2.66	1.61	3.41	1.55	4.58	0.74	86.56	< .001	P>O>L

Welch ANOVA results for the comparison of incentive factors by engagement group are presented in Table 4. Incentive factors differed statistically significantly across engagement groups. For the reward factor, the means of the observers (M = 3.75) and posters (M = 3.44) groups were significantly higher than that of the lurkers group (M = 2.93; F = 14.52, p < .001). For the safe environment factor, lurkers recorded the highest mean (M = 4.54), followed by observers (M = 4.15) and posters (M = 3.16), with a significant and stepwise difference detected across all groups (F = 26.08, p < .001). For the voice factor, posters (M = 4.52) scored significantly higher than observers (M = 4.14; F = 5.66, p < .01). For the exclusive content factor, lurkers (M = 4.28) showed a significantly higher tendency than posters (M = 3.62; F = 6.35, p < .01). Finally, for the being acknowledged factor, a significant and stepwise difference was observed across all groups in the order of posters (M = 4.58) > observers (M = 3.41) > lurkers (M = 2.66; F = 86.56, p < .001).

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that digital fan engagement is neither uniform nor randomly distributed. Across all three dimensions examined, participation level emerged as a structuring variable: lurkers, observers, and posters differed not only in how frequently they interacted with club content but in what motivated that interaction and what conditions would be required to shift it. The Lurker/Observer/Poster typology, developed in the broader online community literature, translates meaningfully to the sport fandom context, where psychological identification with the club adds a layer of motivational complexity that generic participation models do not fully capture.

The demographic patterns observed across engagement groups are broadly consistent with existing research on sport fan behavior. The inverse relationship between age and engagement level aligns with evidence that younger fans are more likely to adopt active social media behaviors in sport contexts (Clavio and Walsh, 2014). The gender distribution is more striking: male participants constituted the large majority of the posters group, consistent with research demonstrating that gender influences both the motivation to follow sport teams on social media and the intensity of associated engagement behaviors (Aydın and Kurudirek, 2025; Haugh and Watkins, 2016). The most theoretically significant finding concerns psychological connection: the complete absence of posters at low and moderate connection levels, and the

concentration of the overwhelming majority of posters at the very high connection level, suggests that active digital participation is not merely a behavioral tendency but an expression of deeper identificatory commitment.

What this distribution reveals goes beyond a simple correlation between identification and activity level. It points to a threshold effect in which psychological connection functions not as a continuous predictor of engagement but as a boundary condition separating qualitatively distinct modes of participation. Clarke et al. (2024) demonstrated that team identification is systematically associated with stronger behavioral engagement with sport content, and the present findings extend that relationship into the specific domain of social media participation typologies. Kim and Manoli (2023) offer a complementary framework, demonstrating that community identification fosters bonds among fans that strengthen psychological connection to the team and translate into active behavioral intentions including posting and content sharing. Lianopoulos et al. (2020) further illuminate this boundary, showing that highly identified fans are driven by the psychological rewards of belonging, self-esteem enhancement, and collective identity that active community contribution uniquely provides. These findings together suggest that lurkers are not simply less engaged versions of posters; they occupy a qualitatively different psychological position that the Psychological Continuum Model's allegiance stage helps explain but that generic engagement strategies are unlikely to bridge (Funk and James, 2001).

The motivational priority patterns map onto established theoretical accounts of why fans use sport media in systematically different ways. For lurkers, information carried the highest priority, consistent with the uses and gratifications framework's characterization of information seeking as a primary driver of passive media consumption; official club accounts serve this purpose precisely because they are perceived as reliable and authoritative (Katz et al., 1973; Lewis et al., 2017). The dominance of observation among observers suggests a related but distinct orientation: these fans actively monitor the club's digital environment and maintain social awareness without committing to the visibility that active contribution requires, a pattern consistent with evidence that passive consumption is partly driven by fear of missing out on sport-related conversations (Seidman et al., 2025). Together, these profiles suggest that passive engagement is not a residual category but a coherent behavioral strategy governed by the desire to remain informed and connected while minimizing social risk and cognitive effort. That information registers as the lowest motivational priority among posters, despite being the defining orientation of lurkers, further sharpens this contrast, suggesting that the content-seeking function which anchors passive membership is not merely deprioritized as engagement becomes active but supplanted by motivations that reflect a qualitatively different relationship with the club's digital presence.

Where lurkers and observers orient themselves toward the club's digital presence as a source of information and social monitoring, posters inhabit it in a fundamentally different way. For this group, belonging carried the highest motivational priority, pointing to a relationship organized around identity expression and community participation rather than content consumption. Entertainment ranked second, adding an important dimension to the poster profile and suggesting that active engagement with club social media is sustained not only by the pull of communal identity but by the intrinsic hedonic value of club-related content itself. This combination sets posters apart from both lurkers, whose engagement is anchored in information utility, and observers, whose primary orientation is social monitoring, while also reinforcing the pattern noted above in which information occupies the lowest position in the poster

hierarchy. These patterns are consistent with uses and gratifications research demonstrating that active contribution constitutes a distinct gratification dimension separable from the informational gratifications that drive passive consumption (Clavio and Walsh, 2014). Club-cultivated social media brand communities amplify the bonding social capital that transforms individual identification into collective participation, while personalized communication activates fans' desire to contribute to shared fan culture rather than simply observe it (Fenton et al., 2023; Meng et al., 2015). For highly identified fans, liking, commenting, and sharing are the means through which belonging is enacted rather than merely felt, and the prominence of entertainment within this group suggests that the pleasure derived from club-related content is not incidental to that process but part of what makes active participation self-sustaining.

The incentive factor results reveal a pattern coherent with each group's underlying motivational profile. The safe environment factor recorded its highest mean among lurkers, consistent with the established role of social risk perception as a primary participation barrier: for fans who derive value from club content without contributing, the fear of negative evaluation or tribal rejection represents a more immediate obstacle than any absence of motivation, making platform norms that signal inclusivity a more effective lever than content or reward strategies alone. The exclusive content factor followed a similar directional pattern, with lurkers assigning it greater importance than posters, consistent with evidence that perceived usefulness and high-value content play a disproportionately larger role in shaping lurkers' attitudes toward active contribution (Liao and Chou, 2012). Exclusive content functions not merely as an informational incentive but as a social one: insider access signals privileged membership within the fan community hierarchy, and it is this sense of elevated status that may lower the psychological threshold for transition from passive consumption to active participation, a dynamic supported by evidence that content exclusivity enhances the perceived social capital of engagement (Haikel-Elsabeh et al., 2019).

The remaining three factors each followed a different pattern. Being acknowledged followed a clear stepwise gradient, with posters assigning it the highest importance and lurkers the lowest, consistent with a reward learning account framing posting behavior as shaped by anticipation of social rewards such as likes and positive feedback (Lindström et al., 2021). The voice factor showed a different pattern: posters scored significantly higher than observers, while lurkers fell between the two groups, suggesting that the desire to influence club decisions is not uniformly distributed even among passive fans and that voice functions less as a universal motivator than as a factor whose salience increases with existing engagement level, extending Hirschman's (1970) framework in an interesting direction. The reward factor showed its lowest mean among lurkers, consistent with self-determination theory's caution that extrinsic incentives are less effective when participation is governed primarily by social risk rather than motivational deficit; for lurkers, material rewards are structurally ill-suited to the barrier they face, and the cultivation of indirect social belonging represents a more promising activation pathway (Deci and Ryan, 2000; Gong et al., 2015). The picture was different for observers, who recorded the highest reward mean of the three groups, although their score did not differ significantly from that of posters. Since these fans already interact through liking, a tangible return may be enough to make commenting or sharing seem worth the extra effort, which is what the cost and benefit logic of social exchange theory would predict (Blau, 1964; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Posters, whose participation is already sustained by belonging and the wish to be acknowledged, appear to depend less on such external returns (Deci and Ryan, 2000).

Conclusion

This study set out to examine whether participation level, rather than mere presence, could serve as a meaningful organizing principle for understanding football fans' social media behavior. The findings suggest that it can, and that the differences across lurkers, observers, and posters extend well beyond frequency of interaction into the motivational architecture that underlies each group's relationship with club content. By combining the Lurker/Observer/Poster typology with AHP-derived motivational priority weights and a segmented incentive factor analysis, the study generates a more discriminating picture of digital fan engagement than approaches that treat all fans as equivalently motivated.

The study's theoretical contributions operate at three distinct levels. First, the successful application of the Lurker/Observer/Poster typology to a sport fandom context demonstrates that this framework, developed in generic online community research, retains its analytical value when transposed to communities organized around stronger identity commitments and higher emotional stakes. Second, the AHP analysis reveals that fans in different engagement groups do not merely differ in how intensely they endorse the same motivations but in how those motivations are ordered relative to one another, a distinction that Likert-based approaches cannot capture. Third, the incentive factor analysis, grounded in social exchange theory, demonstrates that the conditions most likely to shift participation behavior correspond systematically to each group's motivational profile, suggesting that engagement is governed by qualitatively distinct psychological logics rather than a single continuum of involvement.

The practical implications point in a consistent direction: segmentation, not uniformity, should govern how clubs approach digital fan engagement. For lurkers, whose participation threshold is governed primarily by social risk rather than motivational deficit, the most promising activation strategies involve cultivating platform environments that signal psychological safety and offering exclusive content that confers insider status without requiring public commitment. For observers, whose monitoring behavior reflects a desire for social awareness rather than contribution, strategies that gradually lower the cost of visible engagement, such as low-stakes interactive features like polls or reactions, may be more effective than direct appeals to post. Observers also gave rewards the highest rating, so small tangible returns such as prize draws or ticket discounts could be offered alongside these features to encourage them to comment and share. For posters, whose active participation is constitutive of their fandom rather than incidental to it, clubs would do well to invest in acknowledgment mechanisms and genuine voice opportunities that recognize and reinforce their contribution to the fan community.

This study is not without limitations. The sample was drawn exclusively from football fans in Türkiye, which constrains the generalizability of the findings to other cultural contexts, sport types, and club structures. The cross-sectional design does not permit causal inference; the motivational differences observed across groups may reflect selection effects as much as the influence of engagement on motivation. The reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of social desirability bias, particularly in the engagement and incentive factor measures. The incentive factors were each operationalized as a single item. Although this approach is defensible given the concrete and hypothetical nature of the constructs, it precludes internal consistency assessment and may not fully capture the dimensionality of each factor; future research employing validated multi-item scales would allow a more rigorous evaluation of the incentive factor structure. Finally, although AHP provides a more discriminating measure of motivational priority than Likert scales, the pairwise comparison format places a higher

cognitive demand on respondents, and consistency ratio thresholds do not eliminate the possibility of systematic response error.

Future research might address these limitations by replicating the study across different cultural contexts and sport types to assess the cross-cultural stability of the motivational profiles identified here. Longitudinal designs would allow researchers to examine whether lurkers exposed to safety-enhancing or exclusive content interventions transition toward more active participation over time. Mixed-method approaches combining AHP with in-depth interviews could illuminate the subjective reasoning behind motivational priorities in ways that quantitative methods alone cannot access. The integration of engagement typologies with priority-based motivational measurement represents a direction that may prove productive beyond the sport fandom context, in any online community where participation heterogeneity is the norm rather than the exception.

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