

**Engagement platforms:  
The Influence of Virtual and Physical Engagement Platforms on Value, Loyalty, and  
Word-of-Mouth**

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**Abstract**

**Purpose:** This study aims to investigate consequences of engagement activities on physical and virtual engagement platforms and how these shape the relationship between customers' dispositions to engage, actual engagement activities, as well as outcomes of customer engagement.

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** Data was collected from a survey distributed to a random sample of fans to five teams in the Swedish elite football league. 2031 responses were collected and Structural Equation Modelling was used to test the research model.

**Findings:** The findings revealed positive relationships between engagement activities on both physical and virtual engagement platforms on value-in-use, brand loyalty and word-of-mouth. However, engagement activities on physical engagement platforms had a stronger effect than the use of virtual platforms.

**Research limitations/implications:** This study indicates that type of platform matter to outcomes of customer engagement. In an era where a lot of emphasis is put on virtual platforms as channels for customer engagement, companies should not forget the role and importance of physical presence. Future studies should aim to test these relationships in other contexts, with less engaged customers, or in other fan contexts.

**Practical implications:** Brands should not omit the importance of physical engagement platforms to connect with its customers, and to foster value-in-use, brand loyalty and word-of-mouth.

**Originality/value:** This paper contributes to studies on engagement platforms by simultaneously testing and examining the relative importance of engagement activities on physical and virtual engagement platforms.

**Keywords:** Customer Engagement, Engagement Platforms, Elite Sports, Service Ecosystems

**Paper type: Research Paper**

## Introduction

Managing customer engagement is one of the most important tasks for modern brands (Brodie et al., 2011; Fernandes & Esteves, 2016; Hollebeek et al., 2019, 2020; Jaakkola et al., 2018; Storbacka et al., 2016). Customer engagement drives brand loyalty and consequently, brands that invest in fostering customer engagement, for instance improving presence on social media or innovating new ways to interact with its customers, are often more successful (Carlson et al., 2019; Twilio, 2022). As interactions drives value-co-creation, customer engagement and its locus on interactions has become an essential concept in the marketing literature (Hollebeek et al., 2016). Not the least, as customer engagement also is a fundament to overarching service ecosystems consisting of multiple engaging actors, as well as the platforms where customer engagement takes place (Jaakkola et al., 2018).

Despite the importance of customer engagement, it is only in recent years that studies have started to closely investigate the role of engagement platforms to customer engagement (Breidbach & Brodie, 2017). Breidbach et al. (2014) define engagement platforms as the physical and virtual touchpoints, arenas, or ‘places’ where customer engagement occurs. As such, engagement platforms “[...] *provide structural support for the exchange and integration of resources, and thereby co-creation of value, between actors in a service system*” (Breidbach et al., 2014, p.596). In short, engagement platforms govern customer engagement and its outcomes. Thus, considering the major investments among brands in developing new engagement platforms, practitioners and scholars must understand the dynamics of these (Breidbach et al., 2014).

Dependent on contexts, engagement platforms can take several shapes and have different importance to its customers and to value-co-creation (Blasco-Arcas et al., 2016). For instance, virtual engagement platforms can be Facebook pages, online customer-driven forums, and online marketplaces, such as Amazon.com, which enable online engagement activities, beyond only monetary transactions (Blasco-Arcas et al., 2016). On the other side of the spectrum, physical engagement platforms can be trade fairs, physical stores, and other types of physical (face-to-face) events which enable physical engagement activities (Sarmiento & Simões, 2019). Engagement activities do not only differ in having a virtual and, or physical nature, in some cases platforms are more directed to enable engagement activities between customers, for instance independent fan forums and fan gatherings, if analysing this through elite sports (Uhrich, 2014b). Other engagement platforms are more focused on enabling engagement activities between customers and the focal firm, such as official social media accounts of brands (Vale & Fernandes, 2018), or events initiated by the brand (Sarmiento & Simões, 2019).

We have scarce knowledge in understanding the consequences of these various types of engagement platforms and how they fit in the relationship between disposition to engage, the actual engagement activity, and outcomes of customer engagement (Storbacka et al., 2016). This lack of knowledge is problematic as such understanding is needed to form engagement platforms that can shape the extent of customer engagement (Breidbach et al., 2014). The literature on how engagement platforms relate to customer engagement is largely undeveloped. For instance, much of extant research on engagement platforms have had a qualitative or conceptual approach (see e.g., Breidbach & Brodie, 2017). Hence, although useful, models are needed which helps us understand dynamics of both virtual and physical engagement platforms on a larger sample. This to help managers understand the relevance of their major investments in creating engagement

platforms and being present on both physical and virtual types. With a few notable exceptions it is also rare that studies address customer engagement on both virtual and physical engagement platforms simultaneously. From a practitioner's perspective, as value-co-creation, brand loyalty and word-of-mouth is driven by customer engagement on both physical and virtual platforms, often interchangeably, brand managers would benefit greatly from an improved understanding of which platforms to invest in (Breidbach & Brodie, 2014). Especially in investigating contexts with highly involved customers that often seek to engage both virtually, e.g. on social media, and physically, e.g. on brand-related events (Wang et al., 2020).

Against this background, the purpose of this study is to investigate the consequences of physical and virtual engagement platforms and how they fit in the relationship between the disposition to engage, the actual engagement activity, as well as the outcomes of customer engagement found in the literature. This purpose leads to two main research questions.

- (1) How does disposition to engage lead to actual engagement activities on physical and virtual engagement platforms?
- (2) How does engagement activities on physical and virtual engagement platforms compare in terms of outcomes of customer engagement, i.e., value-in-use, brand loyalty and word-of-mouth?

Empirically, we explore this within the elite football<sup>1</sup> service ecosystem. This is a context that has grown to become a major industry during the last few decades and that attracts millions of fans worldwide (Sund, 2014).

## **Literature Review and Hypotheses Development**

### ***Engagement Platforms and Customer Engagement***

Customer engagement, is the “[...] investment of cognitive, emotional, behavioural and social resources during, or related to specific brand interactions” (Hollebeek et al., 2019, p. 171). Thus, customer engagement centres on the interactions between customers and other actors, often the firm, or firms, in question. Customer engagement can be broken down into the intention to engage, i.e. the willingness to, for instance the disposition to interact with a brand, (Hollebeek et al., 2019; Unnava & Aravindakshan, 2021), or other customers on social media (Gummerus et al., 2012). As well as the actual engagement activities, i.e. the engagement behaviours, such as physically attending brand-related events (Cook et al., 2021) and, or the virtual interaction with the brand on social media (Vale & Fernandes, 2018).

As studies have shown, customer engagement is a microfoundation to value-co-creation (Storbacka et al., 2016). This implies that, within a service ecosystem consisting of multiple actors and platforms, what fosters value-co-creation, and the structures of the service ecosystems, is customer engagement (Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014). For brands, customer engagement is thus essential as it not only leads to value-co-creation (Behnam,

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, elite football refers to 'European style football' (Soccer), not 'American football'

Anagnostopoulos, et al., 2021), but it does also foster outcomes such as brand loyalty and word-of-mouth (Yoshida et al., 2014)

For customer engagement to take place, a platform where the actors participating in the service ecosystem can engage is required (Breidbach & Brodie, 2017). Studies have defined these as engagement platforms and these are the places where actors within a service ecosystem engage and drive value-co-creation (Breidbach & Brodie, 2017). Thus, engagement platforms are cornerstones in the realization of customer engagement, subsequently as well the outcomes of customer engagement.

Breidbach et al. (2014) emphasize that for firms, a main purpose to create engagement platforms is to enable continuous and transparent dialogues with its customers. This is depicted to drive value-co-creation and can lead to brand loyalty (Breidbach et al., 2014). Hence it is important for firms, which strive to foster customer engagement, to create both virtual and physical sites with the right characteristics that allows for customer-firm, and customer-customer engagement activities (Sarmiento & Simões, 2019).

Engagement platforms take on many different shapes and forms, from the completely virtual spaces to the traditional physical outlets such as retail stores, trade fairs, and sport arenas (Sarmiento & Simões, 2019; Stegmann et al., 2021; Uhrich, 2014). Often, physical engagement platforms are considered to foster human connection and direct interaction, while virtual engagement platforms can act as catalyst for human connection and is optimal for information sharing (Sarmiento & Simões, 2019). Breidbach et al. (2014) argue that both physical and virtual engagement platforms are important to enable realize customer engagement activities from a disposition to engage. In some contexts, virtual engagement platforms may be the most relevant to focus on, while in other contexts and in other circumstances physical engagement platforms may be the most relevant. Below, we review these two categories of platforms separately.

#### *Customer Engagement and virtual engagement platforms*

Virtual engagement platforms are platforms, such as social media and mobile applications, where customers and other actors interact and engage in computer-mediated, and digitalized forms (Marino & Lo Presti, 2019; Sarmiento & Simões, 2019). These are defined as “web-based platforms where customers, suppliers and distributors can get together virtually at any time and from any place” (Geigenmüller, 2010, p.286). Thus, customer engagement on virtual engagement platforms does often occur rapidly and fosters virtual relationships between the participating actors (Abeza et al., 2020).

Studies have found that virtual engagement platforms are used by many actors, including customers and firms, in order to drive continuous interactions, as well as monetary transactions (Breidbach & Brodie, 2017). Hence, firms can use virtual engagement platforms to strengthen the connectedness between the firm and its customers (Breidbach et al., 2014). Moreover, Blasco-Arcas et al. (2016), argue that virtual engagement platforms can be constructed with two more purposes. First, to form a foundation for brand communities and the interactions between customers and the firm. Facebook and Reddit are examples of such types of engagement platforms (Blasco-Arcas et al. 2016). Second, another purpose of an engagement platform is to enable financial transactions, such as Amazon Marketplace (Huang & Benyoucef, 2015). In

recent years, studies have also shown that virtual engagement platforms enable customer-firm-interactions to expand beyond national borders (Zhou et al., 2013).

In all, as the disposition to engage drives engagement activities (Storbacka et al., 2016), we hypothesize that:

*H1a: The disposition for customers to engage is positively related to engagement activities on virtual engagement platforms*

#### *Customer Engagement and physical engagement platforms*

Even though social media and virtual engagement platforms have received most attention from scholars, physical engagement platforms remain important for interactions between customers, firms and other actors in service ecosystems (Sarmiento & Simões, 2019). However, reviewing the emerging literature on engagement platforms and their role in service ecosystems, few have examined how physical engagement platforms, and engagement activities on these, compare to virtual engagement platforms in regards to value-co-creation. Sarmiento & Simões (2019) found that while virtual engagement platforms are important when physical proximity is difficult, physical engagement platforms have often more intense and mesmerizing experiences to offer (Sarmiento & Simões, 2019).

In the literature, a number of physical engagement platforms have been studied, including physical stores (Breidbach et al., 2014), sport arenas (Uhrich, 2014), and conventions and trade fairs (Sarmiento & Simões, 2019). Sarmiento & Simoes (2019) find that, despite the emergence of virtual engagement platforms, part of customer evaluations of overall experiences, comes from physical environments. Hence, even though there is a major transition from physical to virtual engagement platforms, physical engagement platforms remain essential for the brand experience (Breidbach et al., 2014).

Hence, based on previous research, we hypothesize that:

*H1b: The disposition for customers to engage is positively related to engagement activities on physical engagement platforms*

#### *Consequences of engaging on virtual and physical engagement platforms*

Based on the literature on customer engagement activities and its outcomes, the following section integrates engagement activities on engagement platforms in these relationships and outlines hypotheses 2, 3, and 4.

#### *Customer Engagement and Value-in-use*

As customer engagement centres on the interactions between customers and other actors, it drives value-co-creation and its subdimensions, such as the three dimensions of value-in-use (Behnam, Hollebeek, et al., 2021; Hollebeek et al., 2019). As Behnam, Anagnostopoulos, et al., (2021) describe, value-in-use can serve as an indicator of value-co-creation as it refers to the value co-created by the customer and other actors within the consumption process. Value-in-use has three dimensions, i.e. experience, personalization and relationship (Ranjan & Read, 2016). All these manifests the customer-oriented nature of value-co-creation and covers dimensions that

can be used to measure value-co-creation (Behnam et al., 2021). However, as this study is performed in a setting which to a large extent is based on experiences, i.e. elite football (Abeza et al., 2020), the main focus is here on the experiential sub-dimension of value-in-use.

Ramaswamy & Ozcan (2016) argued that both virtual and physical engagement platforms are used to strengthen the relationship between customer engagement and value-in-use. Thus, we propose that both engagement activities on physical and virtual engagement platforms will have a positive impact on the experiential dimension of value-in-use.

*H2a: Engagement activities on virtual engagement platforms have a positive effect on the experiential dimension of value-in-use*

*H2b: Engagement activities on physical engagement platforms have a positive effect on the experiential dimension of value-in-use*

#### *Customer Engagement and Brand Loyalty*

Brand loyalty is another fundamental outcome of customer engagement, emphasized both in practice and in academia (MSI, 2010). Brand loyalty centres on a customer's longstanding devotion to a brand and is both a behavioural and cognitive commitment (Jacoby et al., 1978). Thus, as loyalty also includes repurchases and re-visits, for instance continuing to follow a brand and, or the continuation of attending events related to the brand, it has several important benefits from a brand perspective (Yoshida et al., 2014). Also, in relation to customer engagement, studies have found that the more engaged customers are, the more loyal they are to the focal brand (Pansari & Kumar, 2017).

Against this background and considering that engagement platforms facilitate customer engagement and its outcomes, we propose that:

*H3a: Engagement activities on virtual engagement platforms have a positive effect on brand loyalty*

*H3b: Engagement activities on physical engagement platforms have a positive effect on brand loyalty*

#### *Customer Engagement and Word-of-Mouth*

Vivek et al. (2012) found that word-of-mouth, defined as "relating pleasant, vivid, or novel experiences; recommendations to others; and even conspicuous display (Anderson, 1998, p.6) is an important outcome of customer engagement. Customers that are more engaged, and interact more intensively with the firm, are more likely to recruit others to consume the brand (Vivek et al., 2012).

As engagement platforms enable customer engagement, and its outcomes, we propose that

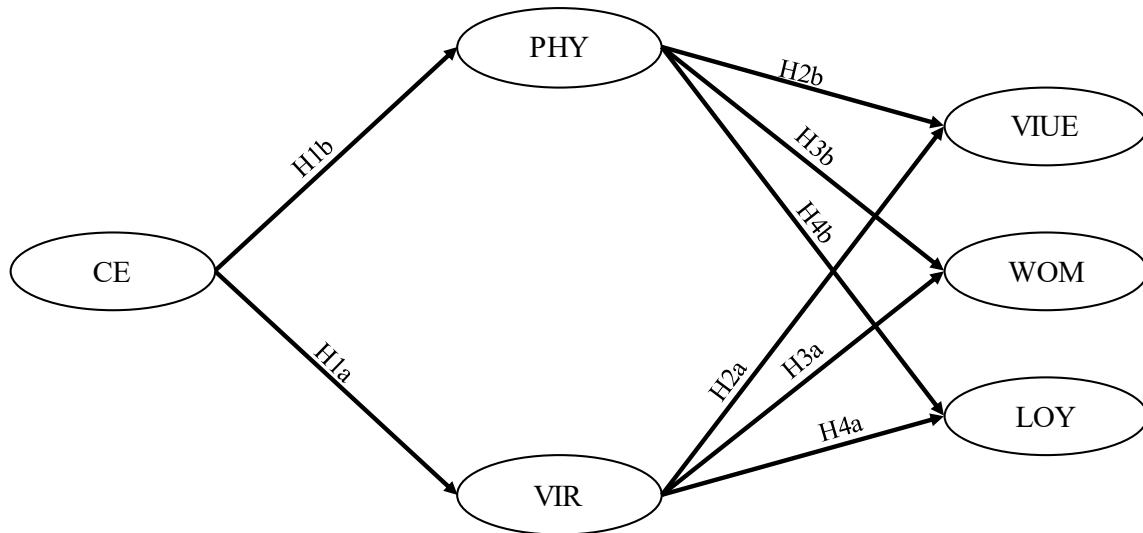
*H4a: Engagement activities on virtual engagement platforms have a positive effect on word-of-mouth*

*H4b: Engagement activities on physical engagement platforms have a positive effect on word-of-mouth*

### Research Model

Figure 1 illustrates the research model used in this article. It consists of two major parts where the first considers the relationship between the dispositional dimension of customer engagement and the engagement activities on the two types of engagement platforms (H1a – H1b). The second part focuses on the outcomes which the engagement activities on virtual and physical engagement platforms create (H2-H4).

Figure 1 - Research Model



\* CE = Disposition to engage with the focal firm; PHY = Engagement activities on physical engagement platforms; VIR = Engagement activities on virtual engagement platforms; VIUE = Value-in-use (Experiential); WOM = Word-of-mouth; LOY = Brand loyalty

### Method

#### Sample and Context

This study enters the service ecosystem of elite football, more specifically customers who had attended at least one game over the last three seasons of one of five Swedish elite football teams were surveyed. The choice of this service ecosystem is based on several rationales.

First, elite football and customers of elite football are renowned for their high levels of engagement, loyalty, and brand identification (Stieler & Germelmann, 2016). This means that studying the dynamics of physical and virtual engagement platforms in such a strong brand community can provide insights both within and outside the sport arenas. This as results manifest the roles of engagement platforms whenever customer engagement is high. Likewise in other types of fan/brand communities, such as around an artist (Wang et al., 2020), a popular brand as Harley Davidson (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995) and, or Apple (Muñiz Jr. & Schau, 2005)

and, or around a certain leisure activity (Chernev et al., 2019; Scott et al., 2017), elite football shows how such affective bonds between a brand and its customers are functioning (Stieler & Germelmann, 2016). The results of the study can also benefit practitioners and academics beyond elite sports as having a highly engaged customer base is deemed as a core objective among many firms (Hollebeek et al., 2019).

Secondly, due to the intensified commercialization and globalization of elite football in recent decades, the number of actors, and platforms within this service ecosystem has steadily increased in recent years (García & Welford, 2015; Numerato & Giulianotti, 2018). Thus, considering this rapid development, the service ecosystem, including the roles of engagement platforms and its embedded actors, may face several tensions. These tensions between e.g., commercial, and amateur ideals imply several interesting collisions that as well may have consequences on the dynamics of engagement platforms. Also, due to the globalization and commercialization of elite football, fans may only use subscription services and social media to engage with their team and other fans (Kerr & Emery, 2011). Thus, despite the existence of fan meetings and socialization in sport bars (Uhrich, 2014) the importance of virtual engagement platforms has increased rapidly.

Third, the service ecosystem of elite football consists of many types of physical platforms, e.g., the live arena, sport bars, fan club meeting etc. (Uhrich, 2014). As Uhrich (2014) illustrates, some are virtual and independent of the club (such as fan fora or media outlets), while others are physical and may be completely governed by the club (such as home games or meet-and-greets). This provides a good illustration of a context where studies have found that both virtual and physical engagement platforms play major roles in fostering value-co-creation (Woratschek et al., 2014). However, at this date there is little knowledge on how virtual and physical engagement platforms in elite football compare in relation to customer engagement. Moreover, despite several studies have argued for the importance of live venues and physical interactions in the service ecosystem, few have examined through a lens of engagement platforms.

### *Measurements*

All non-platform related measurements were assessed using Likert scales (from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree)). For previously validated measures, the items were translated from English to Swedish. The scales used are listed in Table 1. For measurements of engagement platforms, scales were developed based on existing qualitative and conceptual studies (Breidbach et al., 2014; Sarmiento & Simões, 2019; Uhrich, 2014b). These scales measured the perceived frequency of engagement activities on the specific engagement platforms. For customer engagement, the scale of Yoshida et al. (2014) on fan engagement in elite football was used, more specifically the scale related to the dimension of how fans interact with the team. This was to capture the disposition to engage with the brand (i.e., the team).

SPSS software, version 28 was used to process the data. Further on, SPSS Amos 26 was utilized to derive the measurement model and the structural model.

## **Research findings**

### *Measurement Model*

As indicated in Table 1, the items focusing on the “personalization” and “relationship” dimension of value-in-use were excluded due to weak loadings, issues with cross-loadings, and



theoretical resonance, i.e., that the locus in this study is on the experiential dimension of value-in-use.

Furthermore, according to Cho et al. (2020) and Hair Jr et al., (2014), seeing that we have a sample size above 500 (n = 2031), the confirmatory factor analysis (Table 1) was deemed acceptable ( $\chi^2= 1356.893$ ;  $df = 131$ ;  $p = .000$ ; Standardized RMR= .0491; CFI = .937; TLI = .918; RMSEA = .068). To achieve construct validity, some error terms were correlated, such as some items in the loyalty measurement and the physical engagement platforms. This is possible since the wording of these individual items in the scales were similar (Saris & Aalberts, 2003). This procedure generated standardized factor loadings (SL) that were all larger than .60, indicating construct reliability (Hair Jr. et al., 2014). Cronbach Alpha was above .7 for all constructs. In addition, the HTMT-test (Henseler et al., 2015), indicated discriminant validity, at a sample size above 1000, as all the HTMT-ratios were below .9 (Table 2).

Table 1 - Measurement Model

Chi-Square = 1356.893; df = 131; chi-square/df = 10.358; p = < .000; Standardized RMR = .0491; CFI = .937; TLI = .918; RMSEA = .068						
<b>Results of the overall measurement model</b>						
<b>Item</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>SL</b>	<b>TV</b>	<b>CR</b>	<b>AVE</b>
<b><i>Customer Engagement</i></b>						
CE1: I try to collaborate with the club	3.290	1.360	.765			
CE2: I do things to make my teams event management easier	3.410	1.447	.753	29.841		
CE3: The employees of TEAM X get my full cooperation	4.160	1.054	.684	27.690	<b>.778</b>	<b>.540</b>
<b><i>Physical Engagement Platforms</i></b>						
FPAWG: I attend the teams away games	2.060	1.242	.707			
FPHMG: I attend the teams home games	4.220	1.158	.754	20.176		
FPFYM: I attend the club's annual meetings	2.110	1.380	.639	20.362	<b>.743</b>	<b>.492</b>
<b><i>Virtual Engagement Platforms</i></b>						
FPFSM: I follow "TEAM X" on social media	3.910	1.304	.833			
FPFPLSOC: I follow players and managers on social media	2.900	1.447	.756	25.061		
FPFSOC: I am active and join in conversations of "TEAM X" on social media	2.440	1.364	.833	22.560	<b>.849</b>	<b>.653</b>
<b><i>Value-in-use (Experience)</i></b>						
VIUE1: To follow "TEAM X" creates memorable experiences for me	4.450	.838	.818			
VIUE2: How I follow "TEAM X" creates experiences that are unique for me	3.600	1.219	.670	30.116		
VIUE3: As a supporter there are possibilities to follow "TEAM X" in many different ways, which improves the experience of follow "TEAM X".	3.940	.983	.635	28.359	<b>.753</b>	<b>.507</b>

<b>Loyalty</b>					
LOY1: No matter the results on the pitch, I will always follow "Team X"	4.670	.714	.747		
LOY3: The probability that I will attend future games of "Team X" is very big	4.710	.686	.725	30.863	
LOY4: The probability that I will continue to spend more than 50 % of my total event spending's on "TEAM X" is large	3.740	1.314	.723	29.127	
LOY6: I am very devoted to "TEAM X"	4.390	.910	.837	35.968	<b>.844 .577</b>
<b>Word-of-Mouth</b>					
WOM1: I recommend others to be supporters of "Team X"	3.930	1.244	.908		
WOM2: I encourage others to follow "Team X"	3.930	1.243	.959	70.522	
WOM3: I encourage others to attend games of "Team X"	4.090	1.146	.825	52.416	<b>.926 .808</b>

\* CE = Customer Engagement with a focal firm; PHY = Frequency of using physical engagement platforms; VIR = Frequency of using virtual EP:s; VIUE = Value-in-use (Experiential); WOM = Word-of-mouth; LOY = Brand loyalty

Table 2 Correlation Matrix - HTMT-test

<b>Correlation Matrix - HTMT Test</b>						
	LOY	WOM	VIUE	VIR	PHY	CE
LOY	<b>.577</b>					
WOM	.605	<b>.808</b>				
VIUE	.895	.607	<b>.507</b>			
VIR	.590	.496	.607	<b>.653</b>		
PHY	.764	.465	.619	.682	<b>.492</b>	
CE	.600	.490	.546	.546	.767	<b>.540</b>

\*AVE alongside the diagonal; All HTMT ratios are less than .9, thus indicating discriminant validity (Henseler et al., 2015).

### Structural Model

Considering the large sample size (n = 2031), the fit of the structural model was deemed as acceptable ( $\chi^2 = 1824.545$ ; df = 135;  $\chi^2/df = 13.515$ ; p = .000\*\*\*, GFI = .904, CFI = .914 RMSEA = .079; Standardized RMR = .0686).<sup>2</sup> At a significance level of p < .000, the model

<sup>2</sup> The principles for the fit indices are based on Hair Jr et al. (2014) and Cho et al., (2020). The sample size is large in this study (>500), thus our GFI is lower than .9. However, as the other fit indices are acceptable the overall model is deemed as acceptable.

(Fig. 2), supports all the hypotheses, yet there are several important differences in the power of the various effects.

Regarding the effects of the disposition to engage, and actual engagement activities, on the different platforms, the differences are smaller and both beta-values are significant ( $\beta = .692$  for  $CE \rightarrow PHY$  and  $\beta = .515$  for  $CE \rightarrow VIR$ ). Thus, the main differences are in what roles engagement activities on types of engagement platforms play for the outcomes of customer engagement. These results indicate that engagement activities on physical engagement platforms are more important in a context of highly involved customers like elite football.

Furthermore, the model shows that engagement activities on physical platforms have a higher impact on outcomes of customer engagement than engagement activities on virtual platforms. To exemplify, the impact of engagement activities on physical engagement platforms on the experiential dimension of value-in-use ( $\beta = .789$ ) is much higher than the effect of engagement activities on virtual engagement platforms ( $\beta = .193$ ). That relationship is as well true for the effect on WOM ( $\beta = .209$  from engagement activities on virtual engagement platforms,  $\beta = .520$  for engagement activities on physical platforms).

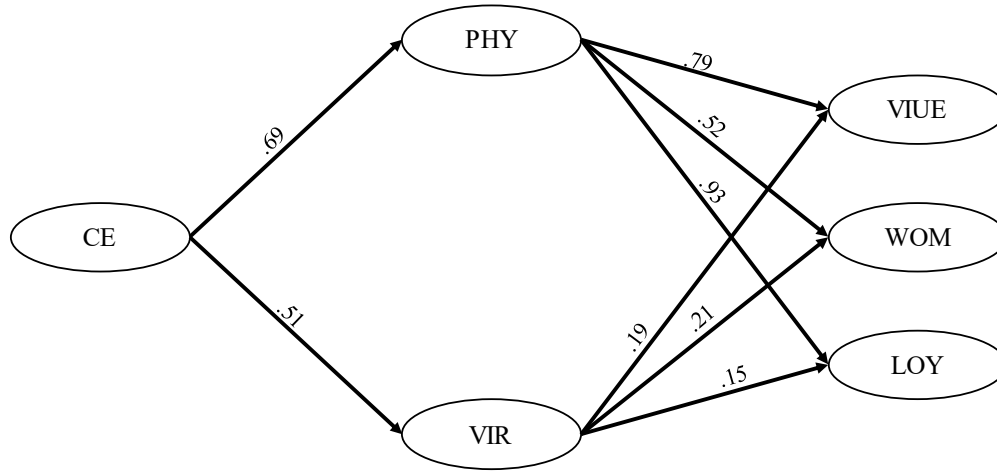
Furthermore, the largest differences consider the path between engagement platforms and brand loyalty. For engagement activities on physical engagement platforms, the effect is the highest among all outcomes of customer engagement ( $\beta = .927$ ) whereas for the effect of engagement activities on virtual engagement platforms, the effect is the smallest among the outcomes of customer engagement ( $\beta = .148$ ).

Table 3 - Structural Model

<b>Structural Model - SEM</b>						
Overall fit: $\chi^2 = 1824.545$ ; $df = 135$ ; $\chi^2/df = 13.515$ ; $p = .000^{***}$ GFI = .904, NFI = .908 ; CFI = .914, RMSEA = .079; Standardized RMR = .0686						
<b>Hypothesis testing</b>						
<b>Hypothesis</b>	<b>Path</b>	<b>Estimate</b>	<b>Standardized Estimate</b>	<b>CR</b>	<b>P</b>	<b>Result</b>
H1a	CE --> Virtual EP	.516	.515	17.951	***	<i>Supported</i>
H1b	CE --> Physical EP	.382	.692	16.722	***	<i>Supported</i>
H2a	Virtual EP --> Value-in-use (Experience)	.119	.193	7.771	***	<i>Supported</i>
H2b	Physical EP --> Value-in-use (Experience)	.882	.789	18.738	***	<i>Supported</i>
H3a	Virtual EP --> Brand Loyalty	.058	.148	6.496	***	<i>Supported</i>
H3b	Physical EP --> Brand Loyalty	.660	.928	17.402	***	<i>Supported</i>
H4a	Virtual EP --> Word-of-Mouth	.213	.209	8.688	***	<i>Supported</i>
H4b	Physical EP --> Word of Mouth	.964	.520	15.970	***	<i>Supported</i>

\*\*p < 0.05; \*\*\* p < 0.01

Figure 2 - Research Model



\* CE = Customer Engagement with a focal firm; PHY = Frequency of using physical EP:s; VIR = Frequency of using virtual EP:s; VIUE = Value-in-use (Experiential); WOM = Word-of-mouth; LOY = Brand loyalty

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the outcomes of engagement activities on physical and virtual engagement platforms, and how they fit in the relationship between the disposition to engage, the actual engagement activity, as well as outcomes of customer engagement.

Based on this purpose, the findings from the survey undertaken in an elite football context, provide several interesting results.

Regarding the first research question, i.e., how disposition to engage lead to actual engagement activities on physical and virtual engagement platforms, our results indicate that, in line with several existing studies, such as Fehrer et al. (2018) and Neghina et al. (2017) disposition to engage lead to actual engagement activities. Furthermore, our results show that this is not dependent on the type of engagement platform. Thus, the study confirms that virtual engagement platforms are important, yet physical engagement platforms which allow for physical engagement activities should not be omitted.

Secondly, we sought to examine how engagement activities on physical and virtual engagement platforms compare in terms of outcomes of customer engagement, i.e., value-in-use, brand loyalty and word-of-mouth. In line with previous research, the results highlight that there are positive effects of customer engagement activities on value-in-use (Behnam, Anagnostopoulos, et al., 2021), brand loyalty (Popp et al., 2016), and word-of-mouth (An & Han, 2020). However,

as we take into consideration the context, i.e., the different platform where these engagement activities occur, our study extends current knowledge. As indicated, most studies on engagement platforms have been examining virtual types and their importance for customer engagement (see e.g. Breidbach & Brodie (2017) and Marino & Lo Presti, (2019)). Yet, this study shows that to foster desired outcomes, such as brand loyalty, engagement activities on physical engagement platforms are essential. Especially for customers that are as highly engaged as fans.

Further implications are discussed below.

### **Theoretical Implications**

Considering the intensified digitalization and globalization of today's service ecosystems, where engagement platforms such as social media enable continuous interactions between various market actors even though physical proximity may be difficult, studies on virtual engagement platforms are needed (Sarmiento & Simões, 2019). However, this study shows the importance of not neglecting physical engagement platforms, which in many cases are more important to orchestrate positive atmospheres and experiences around a brand, an event (Sarmiento & Simões, 2019), or as in this study, around an elite football team.

To the extent of our knowledge, few papers have examined and compared the roles of engagement activities on physical and virtual engagement platforms on the relationship between disposition to engage and its outcomes (Sarmiento & Simões, 2019). Thus, this study builds on existing knowledge of customer engagement and engagement platforms and shows that for firms with both physical and virtual engagement platforms to offer, engagement activities on physical engagement platforms is more important to value-in-use, brand loyalty and word-of-mouth. Customer engagement on virtual engagement platforms remain important and should not be forgotten, for instance in easily inviting new customers (Popp & Woratschek, 2016), developing continuous exchanges (Blasco-Arcas et al., 2016) and opening up for interactions when physical proximity is difficult (Sarmiento & Simões, 2019). However, when customers have physical proximity to the brand, and as in this case, are heavily engaged to the brand, physical engagement platforms are more important. In this study these engagement platforms were matches, events, and other fan meetings, in other contexts it may be trade fairs, physical fan gatherings and concerts that resembles these physical engagement platforms.

Secondly, this also holds for brand loyalty and word-of-mouth. Virtual engagement platforms are still important, but as Crowther & Donlan (2011) suggest, physical events, and in this case physical engagement platforms are important to shaping experiences and engagement activities which generate value-co-creation and word-of-mouth. As Crowther & Donlan (2011) further argue, physical platforms form an intensity and interest, which is difficult to generate on virtual platforms such as social media.

Third, this study focused on a context with many highly engaged customers, i.e. fans. Fans and fan communities are not limited to the context of sports. We can find fans in settings such as the music industry (Choi & Burnes, 2016), the movie industry (Wang et al., 2020) and, or within certain brands, such as Apple and Harley Davidson, and their communities (Muñiz Jr. & Schau, 2005; Wang et al., 2020). In these contexts, where customers are highly devoted to their passion and interest, physical engagement platforms seem to be of peculiar importance. Thus, scholars as

well as other actors, should not omit studying social media and other types of virtual engagement platforms, yet the physical engagement platforms should be prioritized if they seek to understand outcomes of customer engagement among heavily engaged customers, in some cases fans.

### **Managerial Implications**

Blasco-Arcas et al. (2016) stated that engagement platforms are the touchpoints which enable customer engagement and orchestrate the relationship between customer engagement and value-co-creation. Therefore, engagement platforms are an important ingredient in contemporary service ecosystems where actors are faced with many different actors to engage with (Breibach et al., 2014). Engagement platforms can thus serve as facilitators to ensure that the customers with the disposition to engage are engaging with the intended firm, instead of with other firms, or not at all.

In these days, large portions of marketing budgets are invested in developing good presence on social media, and in developing virtual engagement platforms to connect and engage with customers whenever and everywhere. However, as this study has indicated, managers should not omit the importance of physical presence in the lives of their customers.

To foster brand loyalty, word-of-mouth and value-in-use, we highly recommend managers to invest in maintaining high-quality physical engagement platforms. This is also to ensure that customers are engaging on physical engagement platforms which are controlled by the firms. In addition, it is important to consider physical proximity as an important element in ensuring value-in-use, brand loyalty and word-of-mouth from the different platforms. One example, from the elite football context, is to create physical engagement platforms in different geographical contexts. This could be realized by organizing national international friendly games outside of their home arena (Maderer et al., 2016) which could, for example, generate higher brand loyalty. In a retail context, this could be realized by opening pop-up stores in different geographical contexts to facilitate physical interaction with customers.

### **Limitations and future research**

As with all studies, this paper has its limitations.

First, the study is carried out in the context of Swedish elite football. It may very well be so that certain conclusions and results are constrained to this context. The relationship between the various platforms, customer engagement and outcomes may be different in other settings. For instance, when customers are not that highly engaged, as they are with a football team (Yoshida et al., 2014), or not being as locally connected as fans of Swedish elite football often are (Sund, 2014). An important avenue for further research would be to examine relationship where customers have no, or very different access, to physically engaging with the focal firm. Translated to the specific context of elite football, such a study could be set up to investigate non-European fans of English football teams. This is a group of fans which is of substantial importance for the commercialization and globalization of the English Premier League (engagement platform).

Secondly, our study is cross-sectional which implies that we have not captured the effects over time on the roles of physical and virtual engagement platforms. Considering the rapid

digitalization of the elite football market, a longitudinal study of these conditions could, for example, analyse what extent, the role of virtual engagement platforms increase in importance on the outcomes of customer engagement.

Third, it is important to acknowledge that several of the measurement items used in this study are closely linked to the specific context. Thus, in other types of service industries, other types of engagement platforms may be important to include. Future studies should apply the research model of this study in other contexts. In the elite sports context, many customers attend games on a weekly basis, and it may be fundamentally different in other contexts with less reoccurring engagement activities (for example in the music industry).

Apart from these limitations, we argue that more research is needed comparing and empirically examining the roles of both physical and virtual engagement platforms. This could also include adding outcome variables such as the two other dimensions of value-in-use (personalization and relationship) and adding other actors. For instance, if further investigating the service ecosystem of elite football it would be relevant to integrate sponsors and media as important actors.

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