Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal

Social representations of digital merchandise in contemporary sports consumption

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Received 30 July 2025
Revised 20 February 2026
21 July 2026
6 October 2026
Accepted 19 October 2026

Abstract

Purpose – Digital merchandise has recently transformed the consumption of sports. Existing research has focused on individual adoption behaviors or broader cultural implications, overlooking how fans collectively construct meanings around these digital innovations. As authenticity and belonging are central to fan identity, however, examining how digital merchandise is socially represented offers deeper insights into its integration within fandom than individual adoption metrics alone. To address this gap, this research aims to examine how football fans collectively represent the meanings of fan tokens as a form of digital merchandise.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing on Social Representation Theory, this study involved 20 focus groups and 84 in-depth interviews with a total of 166 participants to investigate how digital merchandizing has transformed sports consumption and fan engagement.

Findings – The study reveals two hegemonic social representations of fan tokens: as fundraising instruments for clubs and as mechanisms for fan engagement and base expansion. Each hegemonic representation generates opposing polemical representations, with supporters framing fan tokens as investments in their passion and tools for expanding the fan base, while detractors perceive them as exploitative mechanisms that threaten authentic fandom values. Unlike traditional merchandise, digital merchandise disrupts established anchoring mechanisms and generates strong polarizing ideological divisions.

Originality/value – This research contributes to the literature on sport merchandizing by demonstrating that digital merchandise elicits more divisive social representations than traditional merchandise, which may further jeopardize fan community cohesion. The study offers deeper insights into digital merchandise integration within fandom by examining collective meaning construction rather than focusing solely on individual adoption metrics.

Keywords Digital merchandizing, Fan tokens, Sport fandom, Social representation theory

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Football (and sports in general) has been tied to consumption in a variety of ways (Apostolopoulou *et al.*, 2012; Apostolopoulou and Papadimitriou, 2018; Papadimitriou and Apostolopoulou, 2018). Indeed, there has been "an ongoing transnational hyper-commodification phase since the early 1990s" (Giulianotti and Numerato, 2018, p. 231), in which the ties between football and consumption have significantly intensified. Examples of this intensification include, among others, commercial/sponsorship deals and, very importantly, branded merchandise (Giulianotti and Numerato, 2018). Nowadays, official

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Disclosure statement: The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal
Emerald Publishing Limited
1352-2752
DOI 10.1108/QMR-07-2025-0170

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clubs' merchandise products range from football shirts to pet clothes, decorative items and even expensive jewelry. The significance of merchandise extends beyond commercial objectives. Merchandise plays a crucial role in anchoring team identification, as consumption "has become integral to fandom practice by providing the tools for further symbolic expression" (Dixon, 2014, p. 18). The recent digital evolution has fundamentally disrupted traditional merchandizing, giving rise to what Kennedy *et al.* (2022) term "digital sport fandom". This transformation has introduced innovative forms of merchandise, most notably Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs) and Fan tokens (Chen, 2025; Manoli *et al.*, 2025; Vollero *et al.*, 2024; Zaucha and Agur, 2024). Fan tokens, in particular, represent a novel form of digital merchandizing that combines elements of cryptocurrency technology with sports engagement (Chen, 2025; Manoli *et al.*, 2025).

The rapid emergence of digital merchandizing has attracted significant scholarly attention, with existing research broadly falling into two distinct streams. The first stream focuses on consumer acceptance and behavioral drivers, examining what motivates fans to adopt digital merchandise through theories such as the Technology Acceptance Model (Ante *et al.*, 2024; Lee, 2022; Manoli *et al.*, 2025; Park and Lee, 2025; Schlimm and Breuer, 2023; Vollero *et al.*, 2024). The second research stream adopts a more critical perspective, examining the broader cultural implications of blockchain-enabled merchandise on the sports industry and fandom practices (Chohan and Schmidt-Devlin, 2024; Stegmann *et al.*, 2023; Zaucha and Agur, 2024) under what Chen (2025) terms "crypto-capitalism".

Despite providing valuable insights, both research streams overlook a fundamental dimension, namely, how fans collectively construct and negotiate meanings around these digital tools. As Lebrun *et al.* (2013, 2020) argue, consumption behaviors in socially constructed contexts like sports are shaped not only by individual choices but also by collective representations. This gap is particularly relevant because understanding how fans collectively represent digital merchandise is crucial for determining whether these innovations become genuinely embedded within fandom practices or contested as inauthentic. In contexts where authenticity and belonging are central to fan identity (Apostolopoulou and Papadimitriou, 2018; Dixon, 2014), examining how digital merchandise is socially represented offers deeper insights into its integration, contestation or rejection within fandom than adoption metrics alone. Thus, the aim of our paper is to provide an answer to the following research question:

RQ1. How do football fans collectively represent and construct the meanings of fan tokens as a form of digital merchandise?

To explore these collective meaning-making processes, we employed Social Representation Theory (SRT) (Moscovici, 1976) as our theoretical framework. We conducted 20 focus groups and 84 individual interviews with football fans in Northern Italy between October and December 2023, with a total of 166 participants involved. Our analysis revealed two hegemonic social representations of fan tokens: as fundraising tools for clubs and as mechanisms for fan engagement and base expansion. However, each hegemonic representation gives rise to two polarizing polemical representations, where supporters view fan tokens as investments in their passion and tools for stronger community bonds, while detractors perceive them as exploitative mechanisms that threaten authentic fandom values. This research contributes to the digital merchandizing literature (Manoli *et al.*, 2025) by revealing that fan tokens generate fundamentally different and more divisive social representations than traditional merchandise, suggesting that digital merchandizing in sports consumption may create ideological conflicts that challenge the foundations of fan community cohesion.

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Literature review

Digital merchandise aims to surpass physical merchandise by integrating more participatory elements in their consumption (Vollero *et al.*, 2024). Two notable innovations in this space are NFTs and Fan tokens. NFTs are unique digital assets authenticated via blockchain technology that confer ownership over a specific digital item, ranging from collectible highlights (e.g. NBA Top Shot) to exclusive club-related artwork (Zaucha and Agur, 2024). Fan tokens are fungible cryptocurrencies issued by sports organizations to enable fan engagement and, to a limited extent, decision-making rights (Chen, 2025; Manoli *et al.*, 2025). Built on platforms like Socios.com, fan tokens allow holders to vote on trivial club matters, access exclusive content or even trade tokens as speculative assets (Ante *et al.*, 2024). Existing studies on digital merchandizing can be broadly categorized into two research streams (see Table 1). On the one hand, research has focused on consumer acceptance, as well as the antecedents to the adoption of digital merchandizing (Ante *et al.*, 2024; Lee, 2022; Manoli *et al.*, 2025; Park and Lee, 2025; Schlimm and Breuer, 2023; Vollero *et al.*, 2024). On the other, scholars have critically examined the cultural implications of blockchain-enabled merchandise on the sports industry (Chen, 2025; Chohan and Schmidt-Devlin, 2024; Stegmann *et al.*, 2023; Zaucha and Agur, 2024).

Regarding the first stream, several studies approach digital merchandizing through the lens of consumer behavior, asking what drives fans to engage with these tools. Drawing on frameworks like the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), scholars have examined the drivers behind the consumption of digital merchandise (Park and Lee, 2025). Factors such as performance expectancy, particularly in the form of financial reward (Ante *et al.*, 2024; Lee, 2022; Park and Lee, 2025) and effort expectancy have been identified as key determinants of adoption intentions (Park and Lee, 2025). Hedonic motivation as well as social influence, operationalized through fans' sense of belonging, have also been identified as relevant antecedents (Manoli *et al.*, 2025; Schlimm and Breuer, 2023; Vollero *et al.*, 2024).

The second stream of research focuses on the broader cultural implications of blockchain-based merchandise (Chen, 2025; Chohan and Schmidt-Devlin, 2024; Stegmann *et al.*, 2023; Zaucha and Agur, 2024). In this stream of literature, fan tokens and NFTs are interpreted as additional tools of hyper-commodification of fandom (Chen, 2025; Stegmann *et al.*, 2023; Zaucha and Agur, 2024). The debates around the commodification of fandom are closely intertwined with a broader stream of research on authenticity and symbolic boundaries between market logics and fan communities (Kozinets, 2001). Sociological research has long shown that consumption operates as a terrain of distinction through which groups draw boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate tastes and practices (Bourdieu, 1984). Fan studies have shown how these dynamics permeate fandom, where claims to authenticity function as forms of boundary work through which "true" fans are distinguished from "inauthentic" ones, generating moral hierarchies within fan communities (Dixon, 2014; Giulianotti, 2002; Sturm, 2020; Williams, 2007). Merchandise consumption is deeply implicated in this boundary work, as objects can operate both as markers of legitimate belonging and as symbols of commodified forms of engagement (inauthentic fans as "mediated and consumeristic", see Sturm, 2020). Other authors adopt a more optimistic perspective regarding digital merchandizing, emphasizing how it can enhance fandom by offering immersive experiences (Chohan and Schmidt-Devlin, 2024).

Although offering valuable insights, both research streams overlook how fans collectively construct the meanings around these technologies, leaving the sense-making processes through which they are socially represented unexplored. Indeed, although recent extensions of technology acceptance models (e.g. UTAUT2; Venkatesh *et al.*, 2012)

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Table 1. Overview of existing research on digital merchandizing in sports

Authors	Year	Aim	Methodology	Contributions
Ante *et al.*	2024	This paper investigates the potential of blockchain-based fan tokens as a mechanism for stimulating democratized decision-making and fan engagement in sports	Data analysis of 3,576 fan token polls	The research reveals that fan tokens achieve 50% participation rates among token holders and identifies key factors influencing poll participation and fan token usage
Chen	2025	This paper aims to critically examine cryptocurrency-sport partnerships during COVID-19	Nethnography to examine online forum discussions	This study uncovers perceived conflicts between ownership profit motives and fan community interests
Chohan and Schmidt-Devlin	2024	This conceptual study aims to understand how sports brands can engage fans using digital spaces	Conceptual	The research provides strategic recommendations for sports brands to engage fans through exclusive experiences, fandom demonstration opportunities and immersive interactions
Lee	2022	This study aims to measure the impact of rarity on price in digital collectibles markets	Data analysis of NBA top shot digital collectibles	The research demonstrates that rarity significantly drives higher prices, which in turn generates increased purchase intention
Manoli *et al.*	2025	Qualitative exploration into the consumption of fan tokens within football fandom	The study employs qualitative analysis of data collected through focus groups with fan token consumers	The research identifies fan tokens as serving dual roles – as "tokens of identity" for symbolic expression of allegiance and as "investment tokens" for financial opportunities
Park and Lee	2024	This study aims to examine the primary motives for owning sports NFTs	The study employs a qualitative case study approach using individual and focus group interviews with Kbollect users (using UTAUT2 as a framework)	The research identifies five common ownership motives with financial rewards being the most influential
Schlimm and Breuer	2023	This study explores sports consumer interest in digital tools and Web3 activations	The study employs a survey-based approach	The research identifies consumer involvement as the strongest predictor of interest in digital tools and Web3 activations, highlighting the importance of prior experience
Stegmann *et al.*	2023	This study investigates the potential of tokenization to disrupt value co-creation in sport marketing	The study employs a case study approach with multi-method design combining document analyses and semi-structured interviews	The research demonstrates that governance tokens foster fan engagement through decision-making inclusion

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Table 1. Continued

Authors	Year	Aim	Methodology	Contributions
Vollero *et al.*	2024	This study examines how meanings attached to fan-token-related activities impact team brand identification	The study employs a survey-based approach	The research demonstrates that meanings associated with fan-token activities positively influence both team identification and engagement
Zaucha and Agur	2024	This study considers the NBA Top Shot platform to explore how NFTs reflect the commodification of fan experiences	The study employs qualitative analysis of the NBA Top Shot platform and Discord server interactions	The research reveals how NFT platforms commodify fan experiences and foster investor-oriented attitudes
Our study	–	This study examines how football fans collectively represent and negotiate the meanings of fan tokens as a form of digital merchandise	The study employs a qualitative approach using social representation theory, involving focus groups and in-depth interviews with football fans	–

incorporate social dimensions through the construct of social influence, these frameworks ultimately treat it as an antecedent shaping individual adoption decisions. As such, they do not examine the collective processes through which communities construct and negotiate shared meanings around a technology (Berente *et al.*, 2011).

To address this gap, our study draws on SRT (Moscovici, 1976). SRT posits that individuals in a society collectively construct "a system of values, ideas and practices" that enable them to interpret novel or uncertain phenomena (Moscovici, 2001). Rather than asking what drives individual adoption, SRT asks how groups collectively frame, negotiate and represent a phenomenon (Moscovici, 1988, 2001). Whereas adoption-oriented models such as TAM and UTAUT conceptualize technology acceptance at the individual level, SRT locates meaning-making at the collective, communicative level at which the social legitimacy of an innovation is negotiated rather than individually assessed (Moscovici, 1988). This distinction is central to our research objective, as it is precisely this collective negotiation that adoption-oriented frameworks cannot capture.

Social representations theory

SRT describes a collective system of concepts, beliefs and practices that help individuals make sense of their social environments (Moscovici, 1976). These shared understandings enable people to communicate effectively within their communities by offering common reference points for interpreting social phenomena. Rather than offering a fixed structure, SRT is characterized by its adaptability. Moscovici and Marková (2001) indeed argue against narrowly defined interpretations of the theory, emphasizing that social representations are fluid and responsive to broader historical and cultural changes. This theoretical flexibility makes SRT well-suited to exploring how shared meanings evolve over time across diverse fields of study.

Within the theory, Moscovici (1988, 2001) identifies three forms of social representations: hegemonic, emancipated and polemical. Hegemonic representations are broadly accepted across large sections of society and often promoted by powerful institutions. For instance, the general consensus around climate change as a pressing issue reflects a hegemonic representation. Generally speaking, hegemonic representations tend to be taken for granted within a community, functioning as an unquestioned common ground (Moscovici, 1988). Emancipated representations, on the other hand, emerge within more localized groups and allow for the coexistence of multiple viewpoints. For instance, Wassler *et al.* (2019) found that younger residents within Vietnam developed a distinctly emancipated representation of inbound tourism (i.e. a source of "culture") that coexisted alongside other representations. Finally, polemical representations develop in environments marked by ideological conflict. Polemical representations are not restricted to a critical stance. Rather, they describe the condition of any representation that acquires its meaning in relation to (and in tension with) a competing representation co-produced within the same field of ideological contestation (Moscovici, 1988). In other words, polemical representations do not simply oppose hegemonic ones, they surface when a broadly shared understanding (i.e. a hegemonic representation) becomes the terrain of ideological conflict among groups (Moscovici, 1988). An example could be the different representations of vaccines. Indeed, the hegemonic representation of vaccines as "a tool of public health control" has become the terrain of intense ideological conflict. Within this representation, two polemical representations emerge: one that frames vaccination as an act of social responsibility and one that radically opposes it by interpreting vaccines as instruments of population control. Both representations are polemical not because they are both critical, but because each derives its meaning from its direct opposition to the other.

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Two essential processes underpin the formation of social representations: anchoring and objectification (Moscovici, 1976). These processes can be described as socio-cognitive processes that explain how representations are constructed. Anchoring involves integrating unfamiliar information into existing cognitive structures by assigning it familiar categories or labels. For example, the global COVID-19 pandemic was anchored by mainstream discourse within the category of "public health emergency", drawing on familiar labels of medical crisis. Objectification, meanwhile, refers to how abstract concepts are transformed into symbols, metaphors or images that are easier to grasp and communicate. For instance, Wassler *et al.* (2019) found that Vietnamese residents objectified Chinese inbound tourism through the metaphor "Made in China", signifying a low-quality tourist type. These two mechanisms transform unfamiliar issues into meaningful and relatable content (Moscovici, 1976). In other words, anchoring and objectification describe how representations are produced, whereas the hegemonic/emancipated/polemical distinction describes how they circulate and function within the social field.

SRT offers a useful lens for examining the rise of digital merchandise in sports. As SRT helps explain how novel consumption phenomena are integrated into existing belief systems and represented through shared cultural representations, it enables researchers to move beyond individual attitudes. SRT recognizes that social representations operate at different levels of social aggregation (Moscovici, 1988). In the present study, "society" refers specifically to the fan communities of sports clubs, within which shared meanings around fan tokens are collectively constructed and negotiated.

Methodology

Data collection

This study employed a qualitative research design (Lebrun *et al.*, 2013; Wassler *et al.*, 2019) focusing on individuals who were non-users of fan tokens but possessed knowledge of their nature. Targeting non-users was essential to capture the representations unmediated by personal investment (Manoli *et al.*, 2025), which have already been investigated. While all representations are socially mediated, excluding token users allowed us to focus on representations formed through discursive, symbolic and observational sources rather than through personal experiential engagement. This approach is particularly relevant for understanding how fan tokens are collectively constructed among the wider fan base prior to adoption. Indeed, the legitimacy of novel consumption practices is not conferred by adopters, who have already resolved the question of legitimacy for themselves through the act of adoption, but is negotiated within the broader population in which a consumption phenomenon seeks acceptance (Humphreys, 2010). In the case of fan tokens, this population is mainly composed of non-users, who therefore constitute the primary site where legitimizing and delegitimizing meanings compete. The research was conducted in Lombardy, Northern Italy, a region characterized by high awareness of fan tokens due to active experimentation by several local football clubs (Socios, 2022).

Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling, with inclusion criteria limited to self-identified football fans knowledgeable about fan tokens but who had never purchased or used them. A total of 166 participants were involved: 82 took part in 20 focus groups (each comprising 4–6 participants) and 84 participated in individual in-depth interviews. The participants' age ranged from 18 to 64, with the majority being under 30 years old (see Table 2). Also, most participants were male. The demographic characteristics of the participants in both data collection methods were similar both in terms of age and gender distribution. This distribution broadly reflects the target population, as the most engaged segments of Italian football fans are predominantly male (Deloitte, 2023) and

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Table 2. Participants characteristics and data collection overview

Method	Participants	Mean length	Gender distribution (%)	Mean age
In-depth interviews	84	~ 45 min	Female: 17,9 Male: 82,1	30,5
Focus groups	82 (across 20 focus groups)	~ 60 min	Female: 11 Male: 89	26,1

the age profile is consistent with national data (Statista, 2020). All focus groups and interviews took place in person between October and December 2023 and were conducted in Italian. Both interviews and focus groups relied on the same semi-structured interview guide, organized into four thematic areas:

(1) participants' fandom biography and consumption of traditional merchandise;
(2) knowledge and understanding of fan tokens;
(3) perceived purposes and implications of fan tokens for clubs and supporters; and
(4) perceived compatibility of fan tokens with fandom values and community life.

To ensure that all participants were reacting to the same conceptual object, each session opened with a short, standardized description of fan tokens and a concrete local example drawn from the Socios.com platform [1], with which participants were familiar given the regional context of the study. All sessions were recorded, transcribed and translated by the research team who are bilingual. Transcripts were cross-checked by the team members, with particular attention paid to preserving the metaphorical language central to the identification of anchoring and objectification mechanisms. Combining focus groups and individual interviews was suited to address the research question and aligned with the epistemological foundations of SRT. On the one hand, focus groups created a social arena in which participants actively negotiate the representations of fan tokens in real time. On the other, in-depth interviews enabled us to examine how socially circulating representations are personally internalized (Moscovici, 1988). Since SRT conceives social representations as phenomena that emerge through communication (Moscovici, 1988; Moscovici and Marková, 2001), focus groups reproduced, in a quasi-naturalistic setting, the very conversational processes through which representations are generated, negotiated and contested. Accordingly, meanings that were consensually elaborated across participants and groups were treated as candidates for hegemonic representations, whereas meanings that acquired their sense through interactional contestation, that is, episodes in which participants openly disputed each other's definitions of fandom and of fan tokens, served as the primary analytical markers of polemical representations (Moscovici, 1988). Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The research was conducted in full accordance with the British Sociological Association's Statement of Ethical Practice (BSA, 2017). Specifically, all participants (i) provided freely given informed consent after being fully informed about the research purpose and how data would be used, (ii) were informed of their right to withdraw at any time and (iii) were assured of confidentiality and anonymity in data reporting. All data were stored securely.

Data analysis

Data analysis was abductive in nature (Dubois and Gadde, 2002; Timmermans and Tavory, 2012). More specifically, the analysis was inductive in its initial coding stages and was

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followed by a theoretically informed interpretation. Our analysis unfolded through four steps. We present them as sequential, although in practice these were revisited iteratively, as coding and theoretical interpretation informed one another. First, we conducted open inductive coding, staying close to participants' own language (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Second, codes were iteratively compared and grouped into candidate themes capturing recurring ways of talking about fan tokens across interviews and focus groups (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Third, these themes were interrogated through the concepts of SRT, with the aim of identifying anchoring and objectification processes. An anchor or an objectification was treated as evidence of a collectively shared meaning only when it satisfied two conditions:

(1) recurrence, that is, the same anchoring or objectification structure appeared independently across multiple participants, across both data collection formats and across distinct sessions; and,

(2) in the focus groups, in-situ co-construction, that is, the meaning was visibly built up, negotiated or contested by participants in interaction.

In this way, the "shared" dimension of a representation was evidenced through the convergence of anchoring and objectification structures across individuals and through their interactional elaboration in the focus groups (Moscovici, 1988; Moscovici and Marková, 2001). Fourth, the resulting representations were classified as hegemonic when shared by supporters and detractors of fan tokens alike and as polemical when they acquired their meaning only in mutual opposition to a competing representation within the same interpretive terrain. This process enabled the authors to map two hegemonic and four polemical social representations of fan tokens and the anchoring-objectification dynamics underpinning them.

We acknowledge the interpretive nature of this research and approached our positionality reflexively rather than as a bias to be controlled. The team combined insider and outsider positions with the context under investigation. More specifically, one author is a sport management scholar who has previously researched fan tokens, which may have predisposed us toward engagement-oriented meanings; another is a football supporter, whose familiarity with Italian fan culture helped foster a connection with informants but also led to a potential affinity for the "traditional" values of fan culture; the third, a tourism scholar with expertise in SRT, held a more external position. To make these assumptions visible, we wrote analytic memos during coding, recording interpretive decisions and discussed them in team meetings. Triangulation across data sources and researchers, who independently coded the data, served to interrogate and refine interpretations rather than to neutralize our positions. Coding discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached and divergent readings were treated as analytically productive, as they often signaled contested meanings that informed the identification of polemical representations.

Findings

This study identified two hegemonic social representations surrounding fan tokens, each giving rise to two polemical representations (i.e. one advanced by supporters and one by detractors) for a total of four polemical representations (see Figure 1). The first hegemonic representation revolves around the perception of fan tokens as a fundraising tool for the club, with varying perspectives on their implications leading to two polemical representations (Moscovici, 1988). Supporters predominantly view fan tokens as an opportunity to invest in their passion, while detractors perceive them as an additional means to exploit fans' loyalty and draw funds from them. The second hegemonic representation focuses on fan tokens as a

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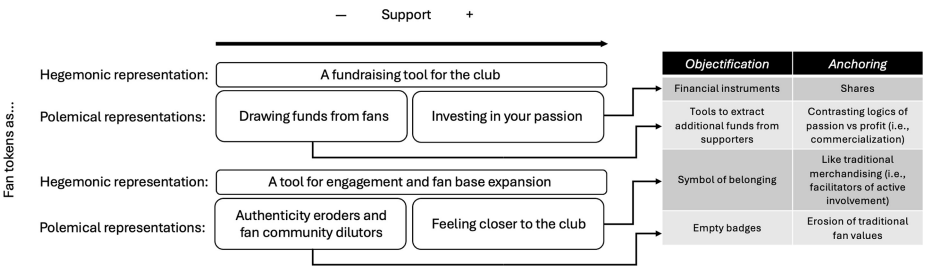


Figure 1. Social representations concerning fan tokens

strategic tool to engage existing fans and attract new followers. As per the first representation, two polemical representations came to the fore. Indeed, while supporters celebrate tokens for the opportunity to strengthen the fan-club bond, detractors express concerns about the potential dilution of what they perceive to be traditional fan values. Additional *verbatim* excerpts supporting each of the representations are provided in Supplementary Table S1.

Fan tokens as a fundraising tool

The first hegemonic representation reveals that fans perceive these tokens as a fundraising tool for the club. Indeed, both supporters and detractors of fan tokens acknowledge that the proceeds generated from the sale of digital merchandizing would be likely directed to funding the club's expenses (e.g. "They could be used to enhance the training center's infrastructure, perhaps hire better physiotherapists or more skilled athletic trainers or even simply improve the stadium", informant n. 75). However, the implications of this fundraising role are interpreted differently depending on fans' conceptualizations of fandom and the role of monetary exchange in expressing loyalty.

Supporters of fan tokens tend to objectify these digital assets as a form of investment in their passion for the club. They anchor their understanding of fan tokens in familiar financial instruments, likening them to shares or stakes in the team (e.g. "They work a bit like shares in football teams", informant n. 57). Indeed, for these supporters, financial expenditure through fan tokens is not merely a commercial act but a gesture that reinforces their sense of belonging and influence within the club's ecosystem (e.g. "Buying fan tokens is like expressing your faith for [the club]", informant n. 15).

Conversely, detractors interpret fan tokens as mechanisms of commodification that exploit fan loyalty for financial gain (Chen, 2025; Zaucha and Agur, 2024). These fans fear that this digital form of merchandizing could intensify existing economic stratification within supporter communities, where economic capital determines levels of influence, marginalizing those unwilling to spend on these tools. They objectify fan tokens as tools designed primarily to extract additional funds from supporters, reflecting concerns about the increasing commercialization of football and the potential erosion of authentic fan culture (Spracklen, 2022; Sturm, 2020). This critical perspective is anchored in a contrasting logic that views passion and profit as fundamentally opposed (e.g. "This economic world is far, very far from […] the real world of football, the beauty, the passion of the fans […] this is a coin at the expense of passion", informant n. 37). For them, non-monetary devotion is treated as the legitimate currency of authentic fandom, while monetary participation is seen as a lesser or even suspect, basis for belonging (Dixon, 2014). This polemical representation may generate consumer boycotts of digital merchandizing, as those who perceive these tools as

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exploitative mechanisms actively resist what they view as financial manipulation of their loyalty (e.g. "Any initiative, which seems to take advantage of our passion, for example by asking for money, will be resisted", informant n. 6).

Fan tokens as a tool for engagement and fan base expansion

The second hegemonic social representation suggests that tokens are also perceived as a strategic avenue not only for engaging existing fans but also for expanding the fanbase. As with the previous social representation, divergent interpretations of fandom give rise to two opposing polemical representations.

On the one hand, supporters celebrate fan tokens as a means of actively participating within the fan community and expanding the club's global reach. Supporters celebrate fan tokens as innovative means to enhance participation and foster a sense of belonging, especially for geographically dispersed fans. They objectify fan tokens as facilitators of active involvement (e.g. "a symbol of belonging", informant n. 66). For these supporters, fan tokens transcend mere consumption; they are gateways to deeper engagement and co-creation of fan culture (e.g. *[Fan tokens are a] useful tool to go and eliminate barriers between the fan and the team […] creating a stronger community*, informant n. 9). The global accessibility of fan tokens is seen as democratizing, allowing fans from diverse locations to partake in club life and strengthen communal bonds (e.g. *Even on the other part of the world, [someone buying fan tokens] would end up following the team more*, informant n. 38).

Conversely, detractors are afraid these tools might attract individuals who merely seek superficial involvement with the club (Chen, 2025). The democratization celebrated by fan token supporters may, for detractors, signal the homogenization of fan culture. Digital merchandizing is seen to promote superficial forms of engagement (e.g. "They [i.e. casual fans attracted by digital merchandizing] will never be able to understand what it means to support your city's team, to be so "attached", focus group n. 14). These fans anchor their understanding of fan tokens in concerns about the erosion of traditional fan values, relating these digital tools to broader fears about superficial engagement (e.g. "Fan tokens can bring in more people, but are they really fans? We need supporters who are dedicated. […] a true fan is someone who is happy because he goes to see and support his favorite team at the stadium, he doesn't care about these things", informant n. 21). They objectify fan tokens as "empty badges" that erode the authenticity of the fan community, fearing that the ease of digital participation could undermine the emotional intensity and physical presence historically associated with devoted fandom. Part of this skepticism is rooted in the immaterial nature of the object itself. Unlike jerseys or scarves, fan tokens cannot be worn, displayed or ritually mobilized in public and several participants visibly struggled to attach meaning to a form of merchandise that leaves no tangible trace of support (e.g. "A shirt you wear, you show it, you pass it on to your son. A token […] where is it? It is nothing you can touch", focus group n. 18). The aspects defining a "real" supporter were particularly debated during the focus groups, with participants engaging in extensive discussions on the subject (e.g. Participant A: "If you buy the token you are not automatically a fan […] a fan is at the stadium every Sunday". Participant B: "But I cannot always go to the stadium […] does that make me less of a fan? For someone living far away, the token is a way to be there". Participant A: "[…] that is being a customer, not a supporter", focus group n. 6).

Read together, these excerpts show that the emphasis on true fans as those who attend matches and demonstrate emotional dedication constitutes boundary work that detractors perform to protect against perceived risks of commercial innovations. Two elements, recurring across the excerpts above and in Table S1, characterize this boundary work. First, participants associate authenticity with forms of commitment that cannot be bought: physical

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presence ("a fan is at the stadium every Sunday", focus group n. 6), local attachment and emotional investment ("support your city's team, to be so "attached", focus group n. 14) and loyalty over time ("people who today follow us and tomorrow follow whoever wins", informant n. 36, Table S1). By contrast, token buyers are delegitimized because their relationship with the club is perceived as mediated by money and oriented toward personal gain (Sturm, 2020). This distinction is made explicit when participants describe token buyers as "customers" rather than "supporters", placing them outside the boundaries of the fan community. Second, this boundary is deeply moral. Authentic fans are portrayed as more worthy of belonging, whereas token buyers are represented as superficial, carrying what participants describe as an "empty" badge of fandom. Importantly, however, this boundary is not universally accepted. It is actively contested, as illustrated by those participants who argue that fan tokens provide a legitimate way of maintaining a meaningful connection with the club even when geographically distant. The debate over the "true fan" shows how the community continuously defines itself by distinguishing authentic supporters from an inauthentic other (Giulianotti, 2002). Thus, while aimed at preserving perceived authenticity, the polemical representations voiced by detractors of digital merchandizing may ultimately foster exclusionary practices that fragment fan communities.

Discussion

Using the lens of SRT, we were able to move beyond the mere acceptance of technology and instead delve into the shared representations of fan tokens (Manoli *et al.*, 2025; Schlimm and Breuer, 2023; Vollero *et al.*, 2024). This revealed not only the hegemonic social representations of income generation and fan engagement, which echo what has emerged from existing studies examining traditional physical merchandise (Apostolopoulou *et al.*, 2012; Apostolopoulou and Papadimitriou, 2018; Papadimitriou and Apostolopoulou, 2018), but also four polemical representations of digital merchandise. These polemical representations contradict what existing literature on sport merchandise has identified thus far (Apostolopoulou *et al.*, 2012; Apostolopoulou and Papadimitriou, 2018; Papadimitriou and Apostolopoulou, 2018), suggesting that digital merchandise can have a rather divisive effect on sport fans.

From a SRT perspective, the familiar anchoring processes that fans use to understand traditional merchandise appear inadequate for making sense of these digital tools. Unlike traditional merchandise, which exists within established frameworks of tangible ownership (Apostolopoulou *et al.*, 2012; Apostolopoulou and Papadimitriou, 2018; Papadimitriou and Apostolopoulou, 2018), fan tokens operate in a still-emerging space that blurs the boundaries between authentic emotional expression and financial investment. This creates what Moscovici and Marková (2001) describe as representational ambiguity. Fan tokens are familiar enough to be recognized as merchandise, yet unfamiliar enough in their cryptocurrency-like properties and speculative potential to generate profound disagreement (i.e. contrasting logics of passion vs profit). This representational ambiguity manifests in two ways. First, our analysis reveals that detractors of fan tokens fear that these digital tools could intensify existing economic stratification within supporter communities, where economic participation further becomes a marker of legitimacy and influence. What fan tokens introduce is not a new hierarchical system *per se*, but rather an intensification and formalization of economic capital as a dimension of fan legitimacy. This creates potential tensions where the traditional currencies of authentic fandom (i.e. passion, loyalty, physical presence, see Dixon, 2014) may be continuously displaced by economic participation. Second and more fundamentally, while the representation of fan tokens as tools for fan exploitation mirrors the wider arguments on the hyper-commodification of sport fandom

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(Chen, 2025; Stegmann *et al.*, 2023; Zaucha and Agur, 2024), their representation as eroders to fandom raises a wider question. Here, fan tokens are not simply critiqued as exploitative, but as actively destructive of fan identity itself. This positions them as existential threats to the very foundations of what supporters understand as authentic fandom (Spracklen, 2022; Sturm, 2020). This represents a more divisive representational dynamic than traditional merchandise, which, despite its commercial nature, remains relatively consensual in its legitimacy (Papadimitriou and Apostolopoulou, 2018).

Moving from these findings to their interpretation, we theorize three interrelated mechanisms that may explain why digital merchandise intensifies polemical representations. The first, most directly grounded in the data, is weak symbolic anchoring due to immateriality. Traditional merchandise is anchored in decades of embodied, public and ritualized display practices (e.g. wearing the jersey, waving the scarf) that render its meaning largely consensual (Apostolopoulou and Papadimitriou, 2018). Digital merchandise lacks such sedimented cultural perceptions, as shown by participants' struggle to attach meaning to "nothing you can touch" (focus group n. 18). In SRT terms, its anchoring and objectification remain incomplete, leaving the object semantically open and therefore contestable. The second and third mechanisms are more interpretive. The second is the entanglement of fandom with investment logic, derived from the polemical representations of fan tokens as a fundraising tool, anchored in "shares" by supporters and in the opposition between passion and profit by detractors. Fan tokens fuse emotional attachment with financial speculation, importing a market logic into a domain governed by an ethos of disinterested devotion, thus making the object a natural site of boundary work. The third is contamination by crypto-culture associations. Detractors' framing of the token as "a coin at the expense of passion" (informant n. 37) suggests that fan tokens are anchored, in the SRT sense, to the preexisting (and itself polemical) representational field of cryptocurrencies, whose connotations of speculation are transferred onto the new object. Together, these mechanisms may explain why digital merchandise, unlike its traditional counterpart, remains suspended in ideological contestation.

Relatedly, the recurring debate around the figure of the "true fan" reported in the Findings can be theorized as a form of symbolic boundary work (Lamont and Molnár, 2002). Drawing on Bourdieu's (1984) account of distinction and fan studies on authenticity (Dixon, 2014; Giulianotti, 2002; Sturm, 2020; Williams, 2007), we interpret participants' recurring disputes over who qualifies as a "true fan" as struggles over the symbolic boundaries of legitimate fandom. Within these struggles, fan tokens become a boundary object around competing definitions of authentic membership. Taking a stance toward them therefore serves not merely to express a preference for or against digital merchandise, but to claim "authenticity" in fandom.

Theoretical implications

This study makes several contributions to the literature on sport fandom, digital merchandise and SRT. First, it extends the application of SRT in the context of digital consumer culture by showing how fan tokens give rise to polemical representations. These representations challenge the assumption that digital merchandise and their engagement capabilities are inherently welcomed by fans (Chohan and Schmidt-Devlin, 2024; Manoli *et al.*, 2025). Second, the study contributes to sport marketing and fandom research by distinguishing between the representational logics of physical and digital merchandise (Apostolopoulou *et al.*, 2012; Apostolopoulou and Papadimitriou, 2018; Manoli *et al.*, 2025). Indeed, our findings suggest that fan tokens disrupt traditional anchoring mechanisms and introduce ambivalence and dissonance (Moscovici, 1976). While physical merchandise operates as a

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consensual representation of fandom, fan tokens fall short of representing its socially shared norms as they remain insufficiently anchored and objectified owing to the three mechanisms theorized above. The concept of "emotional-investment versus financial-speculation" emerges as a tension central to understanding the reception of digital fan experiences (Chen, 2025; Stegmann *et al.*, 2023; Zaucha and Agur, 2024). In line with this, the polemical representations hint at the existence of ideological contestation among sport fans, pointing to a potential reconfiguration of fan/consumer relationships with their favorite teams (Giulianotti and Numerato, 2018). Third, by reinterpreting the "true fan" debate as symbolic boundary work (Bourdieu, 1984; Lamont and Molnár, 2002), our study shows that polemical representations can be understood as the discursive form that boundary work takes when a community's definition of authentic membership is destabilized by a novel consumption object.

Practical implications

This study offers valuable guidance to sport organizations, marketers and digital merchandise developers. When introducing fan tokens, sport organizations are not merely launching a new product, they are intervening in the symbolic boundary work through which fan communities define who counts as a "true fan". Accordingly, resistance to digital merchandise should not be read as technological reluctance to be overcome through education, but as an expression of anxieties around authenticity within fandom. Three recommendations, each tied to one of the mechanisms theorized above, follow. First, organizations should frame digital merchandise in ways that do not implicitly hierarchize modes of support, avoiding communication that positions token holders as more engaged or privileged fans. This may involve creating spaces for dialogue where skeptical fans can express concerns without being positioned as resistant or "anti-innovation". Second, organizations should anchor fan tokens in existing, consensual symbols and rituals of fan culture to compensate for their weak symbolic anchoring (e.g. linking them to tangible experiences or matchday practices). Indeed, our study suggests that sport organizations should consider implementing a hybrid approach that bridges traditional and digital merchandise rather than positioning fan tokens as replacements. By anchoring digital innovations in familiar, tangible experiences, organizations can leverage the objectification processes that fans already understand. Third, they should manage the crypto association carefully, decoupling the fan experience from speculative framings that trigger distrust. The suggested hybrid approach would help mitigate concerns about speculation by ensuring that digital tokens retain intrinsic value through their connection to physical experiences and merchandise. At the same time, the divisive social representations identified in this study carry important policy implications for regulators and governing bodies. Indeed, regulators could prohibit the immediate sale of tokens to avoid speculative bubbles and ensure that fan tokens serve their intended purpose of genuine engagement. Such regulations could mandate minimum holding periods or implement cooling-off mechanisms that discourage purely profit-driven participation.

Limitations and future research

Although this study provides valuable insights into the social representations of fan tokens, it is not without limitations. First, the study focused exclusively on non-users of fan tokens. While this was a deliberate choice, consistent with our objective, it entails interpretive limitations. More specifically, our analysis may accentuate skeptical and polemical meanings. Closely related to this aspect, the study's qualitative design, while appropriate for exploring collective meaning-making, does not allow for quantification of the prevalence of

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different representations across fans. Future research could employ mixed-methods approaches to measure the distribution of polemical representations. Second, the research was conducted exclusively in Northern Italy with football fans, limiting the generalizability of findings across different cultural contexts and sports. The social representations of fan tokens may vary significantly in countries with different football cultures, economic conditions or digital adoption patterns. Future research should explore cross-cultural variations in fan token representations to understand how cultural contexts shape collective meaning-making processes around digital merchandise. Third, most participants were male. Although this reflects the most engaged segments of Italian football fandom (Deloitte, 2023), women's perspectives are less visible in our findings. As women are more represented among the less engaged segments that fan tokens aim to attract, they may represent the "true fan" and community dilution debates differently. Future research could study female fans to explore how gender shapes these representations. To conclude, although fan tokens are now the most widely diffused form of digital merchandise, future studies should investigate whether similar polemical representations emerge around other forms of digital merchandise, such as NFTs or virtual reality experiences and across different sports contexts.

Note

[1.] www.socios.com/fan-tokens/

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Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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