

Beyond engagement: how clubs translate institutional values into well-being – evidence from Italian rugby

Paolo Cunico

Venice School of Management, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Venice, Italy

Michela Cesarina Mason

Department of Economics and Statistics, University of Udine, Udine, Italy, and

Riccardo Michieletto

Department of Marketing, Acciaierie Venete SpA, Padua, Italy and

Petrarca Rugby, Padua, Italy

Abstract

Purpose – This paper contributes to Management Decision's "The Practice of Making Decisions" section by examining how sports organisations should balance engagement growth and institutional values. Using Italian rugby clubs as a case, it asks what leaders should prioritise when resources are limited: growing digital audiences or maintaining rituals like the *terzo tempo*.

Design/methodology/approach – A mixed-methods approach includes a survey of 1,301 Italian rugby players and interviews with five club managers. The survey used regression analysis, and the interviews covered belonging and well-being, values and relationships and identities outside of playing.

Findings – Interviews with managers show clubs mainly act as value translators, promoting institutional values through practical examples such as the *terzo tempo*. Survey data align, indicating fanship and fandom relate to subjective well-being, with internalised psychological aspects showing the strongest link. A new finding is off-field identity: both managers and respondents identify a "rugby person" by behaviour outside the game, showing lived values influence daily conduct beyond rugby.

Research limitations/implications – This study is based on Italian rugby and uses cross-sectional data, which limits causal inference and direct generalisability. For club managers, coaches and federation leaders, the key takeaway is that good governance is not about how much engagement is generated. It is about accurately conveying and upholding the organisation's core values, even when faced with limited time, resources and competing demands.

Originality/value – While earlier studies distinguish between fanship and fandom, no study has examined how club-defined values are put into practice and absorbed by members, or how this shapes off-field identity as part of governance. This article presents value translation as a key managerial role in organisations where identity matters a lot. This concept works not just in sport but anywhere culture, belonging and shared values are strategic assets.

Keywords Rugby, Fanship, Fandom, Well-being, Off-field identity, Sport governance

Paper type Research article

The engagement conundrum: sports organisations' online and offline actions

Fan engagement – referring to how often and intensely fans interact with a club's content – has become a key metric influencing sponsorship deals, media visibility and investor trust (Cao and Matsuoka, 2025). This trend is driving sports organisations to adopt entertainment-style marketing strategies aligned with broadcasting revenues and global digital platforms



(Numerato and Giulianotti, 2018). The shift toward on-demand, algorithm-driven content increasingly impacts resource distribution and success measurement (Petersen-Wagner *et al.*, 2026). This paper applies the Management Decision Practice of Making Decisions framework (Cristofaro and Randolph-Seng, 2026) to analyse whether sports managers should concentrate on expanding their quickly growing online audience or focus on developing a smaller, more gradually growing offline community.

In this model, organisations act as platforms with fans as audiences. Success is mainly judged by reach and dwell time. Online access can influence offline events, and higher visibility may weaken community bonds and long-term fan identity (Winell *et al.*, 2023). Netflix's *Drive to Survive*, a documentary about Formula 1, exemplifies this. The documentary's popularity helped grow the sport's international fanbase (Shah and Williams, 2025), leading to races being held in new, glamorous venues like Miami that attract social media attention. This trend endangers historic circuits – beloved by longtime fans but less attractive for the new fans of the sport – threatening their presence in the championship schedule. Long-term fans see this as an identity loss, criticising management for neglecting venues that shaped the sport's identity, as valuable as the sport itself.

Unlike Formula 1, rugby is fundamentally guided by its traditional core values – integrity, respect, solidarity, passion and discipline (World Rugby, 2009) – which are exemplified during the *terzo tempo*, a ritual where opposing teams share food and drink after matches. Rugby, like other sports, is affected by broadcasting rights and globalisation, which incorporates engagement metrics into club and tournament management. This paper explores how rugby organisation managers operate within this environment, focusing on how they uphold the sport's core values and communicate them to members.

This article examines the Italian rugby ecosystem, which displays unique characteristics. Italy's rugby scene is unusual: the national team has participated in all World Cup editions and has been part of the Six Nations since 2000, one of the most prestigious tournaments. However, the domestic league remains a niche within Italian sports. Recent success, like Italy's first Six Nations victory over England, has increased interest beyond its traditional audience, especially online, where teams can leverage social media algorithms to promote rugby content. These factors make Italy an intriguing case for exploring this article's research question. Drawing insights from five club managers and 1,301 community members, we find that clubs acting as value translators – rather than mere engagement platforms – generate distinctive outcomes. These include internalised values, a strong sense of belonging and an identity participants carry into their daily lives – outcomes that the attention economy cannot produce.

The voice of the managers

To explore how managerial decisions facilitate the flow of values from the institutional level into daily practice, we interviewed five managers from Italian rugby clubs of different sizes and competitive levels. The interviews aimed to understand how rugby values shape club activities and influence members, focusing on specific actions taken to promote those values. Additionally, managers were asked whether these activities have an impact on members' well-being and off-field conduct.

All managers emphasised the significance of rugby's core values in shaping the lives of members and their families, both on and off the field: *"The motto of our club is 'Develop athletes of value and of values', because an athlete may stop practising sport, but they remain a citizen for life. This is what we aim for: we always encourage our girls and boys to be champions both on and off the pitch"*. This conviction stems from sport's potential to transmit values from the team to society: *"Rugby is a subset of the broader community. Our approach is rooted in active citizenship, common sense, and determination, always tempered with respect"*. Managers hold a strong belief in sport's educational influence, especially rugby: *"We see sport as a powerful tool for conveying essential values, and rugby is among the most effective sports in this regard. Respect for rules, opponents, oneself, teammates, and facilities;*

mutual support, collaboration, courage, and responsibility—these are daily lessons learned through play and team life in rugby”.

This framing uncovers a governance logic fundamentally different from the engagement economy. The club’s goal is not to maximise the fans’ relationship with the team but to shape a specific type of person, especially through communal moments like the *terzo tempo* and away trips. Achieving this requires fostering a genuine, shared sense of belonging – described as “*a stable emotional structure in daily life*” – which influences the club’s management practices. Managers highlighted actions like guiding newcomers’ values and maintaining transparent communication about goals with members and the team. This exchange is reinforced by role models such as senior players, parents and coach-educators, and efforts to engage supporters as athletes, volunteers, managers, team assistants or coaches, giving them purpose, routine and recognition. All emphasised the importance of proper communication channels like WhatsApp groups and the *terzo tempo*. A manager clearly stated: “*I would say undoubtedly the terzo tempo – it is the distinctive element of rugby as a sport.*” From a governance standpoint, what makes the *terzo tempo* particularly significant is its resistance to monetisation: it is an act of hospitality, reciprocity and mutual recognition that does not generate measurable audiences, yet all five managers see it as central to their club’s identity.

A manager described a distinct but complementary mechanism: reimbursing every volunteer role, however small, from equipment set-up to merchandise sales and away-day logistics. The amounts involved are modest, but the manager was explicit that the practice is not primarily financial: it signals to volunteers “*that the club knows you are there and thanks you for your contribution. It makes you understand that you count*”. One example offered was a former player who used to set up the sound system unpaid, as an informal act of loyalty; once the club began reimbursing this role, the relationship did not weaken but changed structure, from an individual favour to a recognised contribution to the organisation. This illustrates that value translation need not rely on a single flagship ritual: it can also take the form of small, deliberate governance choices that convert unpaid goodwill into recognised membership.

Managers are motivated by the understanding that the sport’s core values, conveyed through the club’s activities, help shape members’ off-field identity. One manager pointed out that “*a sense of group, loyalty, and determination’ are key rugby traits that former players and supporters carry into their professional and personal lives*”. Another manager stressed actively promoting values through marketing and community engagement to make rugby more than a sport, but a lifestyle. The key insight is this off-field identity does not happen spontaneously but results from deliberate choices in communication, rituals and participation that align with the club’s core values. This resistance to monetisation is a governance signal: the managers see it as a structural decision on attention and legitimacy, not just a communication tactic.

The response of the community

The interviews show rugby’s values embedded in daily club life, internalised through a strong sense of community that extends players’ identity beyond match-day emotions into a lasting part of who they are. This cognitive process, in which a sense of belonging to the club and its community ultimately fosters members’ well-being, is well-known in sports fan research. [Reysen and Branscombe \(2010\)](#) explain that people see themselves through personal and social identities. These include fandom – a deep emotional connection with a team – and fandom – the social side of identifying with other supporters. Further research has investigated how these two identity dimensions affect fans’ well-being (e.g., [Portaluri et al., 2025](#); [Reysen et al., 2024](#)). To support the interview findings, a comprehensive survey based on this literature was carried out with 1,301 participants from the Italian rugby community. Following the Practice of Making Decisions section philosophy ([Cristofaro and Randolph-Seng, 2026](#)), interviews and surveys serve different but complementary purposes: the interviews surface the reasoning managers use when facing the engagement-versus-values trade-off. In contrast, the

survey specifies the psychological mechanism through which that reasoning translates into member outcomes.

The sample included players, coaches, referees, officials and supporters of various ages and skill levels. The survey examined how fanship (FANS), fandom (FAND) and psychological factors (PSYF) – such as value internalisation, belonging, personal growth and emotional regulation – affect individuals’ subjective well-being (SWB). FANS and FAND items were adapted from [Reysen and Branscombe \(2010\)](#) and [Reysen et al. \(2017\)](#), SWB was measured using the WeBS scale ([Lui and Fernando, 2018](#)). PSYF items were purpose-developed for this study, based on established guidance ([Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994](#)), to capture psychological mechanisms through which fan identification links to well-being. These mechanisms align with the social identity approach to health ([Haslam et al., 2009](#); [Jetten et al., 2017](#)) and rugby-specific evidence on value embodiment via club practice ([Light and Kirk, 2000](#)). All questions used a Likert scale and were combined into variables by calculating the mean. To validate the interview results, a question asked if someone immersed in rugby is recognisable by their behaviour outside the sport.

Table 1 reports reliability, correlations and regression estimates. In short: FANS and FAND are both associated with subjective well-being, but their association weakens once PSYF enter the model, which becomes the strongest correlate of SWB. This pattern is consistent with managers’ account: identifying with the club or its community appears to matter for well-being mainly through the psychological experience that identification activates, rather than through identification as such.

The most novel discovery concerns off-field identity. Most participants confirmed the existence of a “rugby person” identity that is apparent in everyday life. A regression analysis of PSYF on off-field identity revealed a strong, significant relationship ($\beta = 0.639$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.200$), suggesting that individuals who have internalised the psychological benefits of rugby are more likely to exhibit a distinct rugby identity outside the sport. This finding aligns with [Reysen et al. \(2022\)](#) research on intragroup helping and off-field behaviour, which indicates that group identification promotes prosocial norms and mutual support, thereby influencing self-concept and actions beyond the group. A manager provided an observation supporting this trend: across all levels of competition he experienced as both player and administrator, he rarely saw rugby players or fans behave rudely or excessively, whether in person or online – a firsthand account that lends preliminary support to the idea that rugby’s off-field identity may also influence digital fan spaces.

Value translation as a managerial function

We define value translation as the managerial practice of designing an organisation’s activities, spaces, rituals and membership structures so that members experience institutional values

Table 1. Reliability, correlation and OLS regression results

	Dependent variable	Predictor	Std beta	CI 95% low	CI 95% high	p-value	R ²
Model A	SWB	FANS	0.382	0.279	0.475	0.000***	0.209
		FAND	0.111	0.033	0.200	0.001**	
Model B	SWB	FANS	0.192	0.090	0.283	0.000***	0.369
		FAND	0.084	0.018	0.162	0.007**	
		PSYF	0.450	0.374	0.526	0.000***	
<i>Reliability and Correlation</i>							
		FANS	FAND	PSYF	SWB		
Cronbach’s α		0.885	0.893	0.760	0.808		
Correlation with SWB		0.41	0.37	0.47	1		

Note(s): Bootstrap CI 20’000 iter

Source(s): Authors’ elaboration

directly, rather than merely receiving them through communication or branding. This distinguishes it from organisational culture (the shared assumptions that exist regardless of managerial intervention), value communication (the one-way transmission of stated values), socialisation (the general process of newcomer adaptation) and identity management (the strategic curation of external image). Value translation is narrower than all four: it refers specifically to the deliberate design choices – how a ritual is resourced, who runs it, what it costs in time and budget – that make a value tangible in everyday practice.

Overall, interviews and data show that rugby clubs act as value translators, influencing internalised well-being and off-field identity – areas where traditional sports marketing falls short. This suggests not abandoning digital metrics but prioritising them within a values-based framework, since such metrics can favour flashy moments over sustained relationships (Petersen-Wagner *et al.*, 2026). One manager exemplified this approach: while his club tracks social media reactions and video views as signs of growth, he considers sporting results and commercial metrics as “a side note to the club’s real success,” which he sees in community closeness and human connections. For identity-focused organisations, digital metrics are useful but only serve as secondary indicators.

The football comparison provides valuable insights: Portaluri *et al.* (2025) discovered that among Italian Serie A fans, strong emotional attachment can weaken the positive link between fanship and subjective well-being. Specifically, fans with the deepest emotional ties may experience lower well-being when their attachment is strongest. In contrast, the interviewed managers report a different pattern: cultural practices like the *terzo tempo* turn emotional bonds into shared, rule-based actions, which can protect against negative effects instead of increasing them. Reysen *et al.* (2022) support this, emphasising that group belonging’s importance stems not only from emotional bonds but also from the positive behaviours it encourages. This is not just an inherent feature of rugby but also a result of intentional club choices, maintaining traditions amid competitive and financial pressures. The five managers serve as translators of values, using their decisions to influence how cultural values shape identity.

Managerial implications and lessons beyond rugby

The findings carry specific and generalisable implications for managers operating in identity-intensive organisations.

For rugby club managers and coaches, the key lesson is that the *terzo tempo* and similar community rituals are not just side activities; they are strategic assets. Practically, this means resource decisions should consider their role in transmitting value, not just how visible or profitable they are. Clubs can track simple signs of how well they are embedding their values – like whether members can talk about those values unprompted; whether they describe the club in relational rather than transactional terms or whether they carry rugby’s norms into other parts of their lives. Since helping each other within groups improves well-being (Reysen *et al.*, 2022), a practical tip is that clubs should set up clear opportunities for members to support one another – through mentoring, volunteering or mutual aid – rather than relying on passive participation.

Boundary conditions. Value translation may not work everywhere. One manager said the shared purpose around rituals like the *terzo tempo* often diminishes during generational shifts or leadership changes, as “*the actors change, the reference points change, and players struggle to see themselves in the new setup.*” During such times, senior players often act as anchors for the group, guiding younger members through disruptions. Clubs with high turnover, large youth sections or weak internal cohesion may lack the relationships needed for value translation to be meaningful and avoid becoming routine. The manager also noted an equity boundary: volunteers accept scarce reimbursement but not the perception that others profit while their contributions go unrecognised. Value translation can survive scarcity but not a perceived breach of fairness. In these cases, managers should focus on relational

stability – mentoring and longer-tenured role models – before relying on value translation as a governance tool.

For leaders of federations and governing bodies, the message is clear: the structure matters. If clubs are the main hubs for value translation, federation policies should protect that role with coherent success metrics: a club with high participation and strong community ties is doing more important work than one with a large following and shallow membership. Federations that focus on engagement metrics for incentives risk unfairly punishing clubs that put in the tough, slow work of genuine value translation.

For managers in other identity-rich settings – schools, faith groups, community organisations, purpose-driven businesses – value translation applies wherever culture and belonging are strategic resources, not side effects. The rugby example offers a template: build rituals that make values felt, not just stated and judge success by internalisation rather than interaction volume.

For the Six Nations and similar tournament bodies. The *terzo tempo*'s symbolic value is already recognised commercially – like beer brands Peroni and Guinness's "Glass Switch" campaign – yet the tournament's own governance has not institutionalised the ritual as an asset. One manager supported private investment in these rituals only "*when it is mediated by the federation and local committees*" and suggested expanding fan villages both spatially across the host city and temporally into multi-day pre-match events, on the model of cycling's *Giro d'Italia*. Four decisions follow from our framework: (1) treat the *terzo tempo* as tournament heritage, not team-level trivia, by giving it an official presence (fixtures, hospitality protocols, historical documentation) rather than leaving it to sponsors to narrate; (2) resist pressure to monetise or schedule around it, since its governance value depends on remaining outside commercial logic; (3) extend village-style activations in both space and time, turning the *terzo tempo* into a multi-day city event rather than a single post-match moment; (4) use it as a protective device against toxic fan dynamics – rituals built on face-to-face reciprocity and shared norms are harder to replicate in purely digital fan communities, where the absence of such norms may be a driver of toxicity (Piche and Naraine, 2024).

Conclusion

The club president who opts to invest in the *terzo tempo* instead of the social media calendar is not being naive about the business side of things. They are deciding based on a clear sense of governance: that the real value their club offers is not in audience numbers, but in the strength of its identity. Italian rugby provides real-world proof of this idea. When clubs stay true to their values, players appear to internalise them, report higher well-being and develop an identity that outlasts the final whistle. The key for managers is not just about engagement or ticking boxes on values but about creating environments where those values are genuinely lived out – and recognising that this, rather than chasing endless attention, is where the real decisions that matter are made.

References

- Cao, Y. and Matsuoka, H. (2025), "Consumer engagement on social media in the sport context: a scoping review", *Leisure Studies*, Vol. 44 No. 3, pp. 495-522, doi: [10.1080/02614367.2024.2324819](https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2024.2324819).
- Cristofaro, M. and Randolph-Seng, B. (2026), "Editorial: the practice of making decisions: from decision models to managing action", *Management Decision*, Vol. 64 No. 5, pp. 1774-1779, doi: [10.1108/MD-05-2026-610](https://doi.org/10.1108/MD-05-2026-610).
- Haslam, S.A., Jetten, J., Postmes, T. and Haslam, C. (2009), "Social identity, health and well-being: an emerging agenda for applied psychology", *Applied Psychology*, Vol. 58 No. 1, pp. 1-23, doi: [10.1111/j.1464-0597.2008.00379.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1464-0597.2008.00379.x).

- Jetten, J., Haslam, S.A., Cruwys, T., Greenaway, K.H., Haslam, C. and Steffens, N.K. (2017), "Advancing the social identity approach to health and well-being: progressing the social cure research agenda", *European Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 47 No. 7, pp. 789-802, doi: [10.1002/ejsp.2333](https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2333).
- Light, R. and Kirk, D. (2000), "High school rugby, the body and the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity", *Sport, Education and Society*, Vol. 5 No. 2, pp. 163-176, doi: [10.1080/713696032](https://doi.org/10.1080/713696032).
- Lui, P.P. and Fernando, G.A. (2018), "Development and initial validation of a multidimensional scale assessing subjective well-being: the Well-Being Scale (WeBS)", *Psychological Reports*, Vol. 121 No. 1, pp. 135-160, doi: [10.1177/0033294117720696](https://doi.org/10.1177/0033294117720696).
- Numerato, D. and Giulianotti, R. (2018), "Citizen, consumer, citimer: the interplay of market and political identities within contemporary football fan cultures", *Journal of Consumer Culture*, Vol. 18 No. 2, pp. 336-355, doi: [10.1177/1469540517744692](https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540517744692).
- Nunnally, J.C. and Bernstein, I.H. (1994), *Psychometric Theory*, 3rd ed., McGraw-Hill.
- Petersen-Wagner, R., Gasparetto, T.M. and Addesa, F. (2026), "Watching football highlights on YouTube: the determinants of demand for short videos", *European Sport Management Quarterly*, Vol. 26 No. 2, pp. 206-227, doi: [10.1080/16184742.2025.2537653](https://doi.org/10.1080/16184742.2025.2537653).
- Piche, M.C. and Naraine, M.L. (2024), "Exploring fans' experience of toxicity in women's sport social media communities", *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, Vol. 33 No. 3, pp. 229-241, doi: [10.32731/smq.333.092024.03](https://doi.org/10.32731/smq.333.092024.03).
- Portaluri, G., Lock, D., Inoue, Y., Mura, R. and Vicentini, F. (2025), "Unveiling the emotional edge: how fans' emotional attachment influences the relationships between fandom, subjective well-being, and attitudinal loyalty", *Sport Management Review*, Vol. 28 No. 4, pp. 796-822, doi: [10.1080/14413523.2025.2513100](https://doi.org/10.1080/14413523.2025.2513100).
- Reysen, S. and Branscombe, N.R. (2010), "Fanship and fandom: comparisons between sport and non-sport fans", *Journal of Sport Behavior*, Vol. 33 No. 2, pp. 176-193.
- Reysen, S., Plante, C. and Chadborn, D. (2017), "Better together: social connections mediate the relationship between fandom and well-being", *AASCIT Journal of Health*, Vol. 4 No. 6, pp. 68-73.
- Reysen, S., Plante, C.N., Chadborn, D., Roberts, S.E. and Gerbasi, K.C. (2022), "Intragroup helping as a mediator of the association between fandom identification and self-esteem and well-being", *Leisure/Loisir*, Vol. 46 No. 3, pp. 321-345, doi: [10.1080/14927713.2021.1971553](https://doi.org/10.1080/14927713.2021.1971553).
- Reysen, S., Plante, C.N., Roberts, S.E. and Gerbasi, K.C. (2024), "Social activities mediate the relation between fandom identification and psychological well-being", *Leisure Sciences*, Vol. 46 No. 5, pp. 681-701, doi: [10.1080/01490400.2021.2023714](https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2021.2023714).
- Shah, D. and Williams, A.L. (2025), "'Drive to Survive' drives new fans to formula 1? Studying viewer experiences of a sports documentary and its influence on the sport's fandom", *Communication & Sport*, Vol. 13 No. 6, pp. 1213-1234, doi: [10.1177/21674795241280209](https://doi.org/10.1177/21674795241280209).
- Winell, E., Armbricht, J., Lundberg, E. and Nilsson, J. (2023), "How are fans affected by the commercialisation of elite sports? A review of the literature and a research agenda", *Sport, Business and Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 13 No. 1, pp. 118-137, doi: [10.1108/SBM-11-2021-0135](https://doi.org/10.1108/SBM-11-2021-0135).
- World Rugby (2009), *Our Values*, World Rugby, available at: <https://www.world.rugby/organisation/about-us/values>

Corresponding author

Paolo Cunico can be contacted at: paolo.cunico@unive.it