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FROM SUBATHON TO BELONGING: HOW MARAPTHON BUILT VIEWER ENGAGEMENT AND LESSONS FOR MARKETERS

Aprilla Suriesto Madaun
Management Study Program, Faculty of Business and Economics, Universitas Sanata Dharma
april@usd.ac.id
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Abstract
The live streaming industry has grown into a multibillion-dollar segment of the digital economy, positioning content creators as productive economic actors whose livelihoods rest on their capacity to build engagement. This study examines Marapthon, a non-stop, subathon-format live streaming program on YouTube initiated by Reza Oktovian (YB) together with the AAA Clan, which reached the world's number-one Most Watched Channels ranking within six days of its Season 3 premiere. Employing a qualitative single-case study design, the research analyzes the broadcast archive of the @ybrap channel and streaming metrics from Streams Charts, triangulated with netnographic observation of community interaction. The data were examined through qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis, and interpreted using a three-layered framework that combines Parasocial Interaction Theory, the Uses and Gratifications perspective, and the consumer brand engagement construct. The findings reveal six mutually reinforcing engagement strategies: participation structuring through the subathon format, real-time reciprocity and personal recognition, authentic emotional narrative, community identity construction, gamification and collective achievement, and sustained liveness and co-presence. These strategies are formulated into practical input for marketers seeking to design humane, authentic, and sustainable engagement to achieve their product goals.
Keywords*: live streaming, viewer engagement, parasocial interaction, marapthon, consumer brand engagement.*

Introduction

The foundation of economic activity has shifted from the physical realm toward real-time online interaction, driven by digital technological transformation. One of the most tangible manifestations of this shift is the live streaming industry, which in less than a decade has evolved from a mere entertainment medium into an economic sector worth hundreds of billions of dollars. The global live streaming market was valued at approximately USD 113.21 billion in 2024 and is projected to reach USD 600.12 billion by 2032, growing at a compound annual growth rate of 23.28% (SNS Insider, 2025). Interest in live streaming has likewise been remarkable, as total live-broadcast watch time reached 32.5 billion hours throughout 2024, double the figure recorded in 2019 (Teleprompter, 2025). In 2025, more than 3.4 billion users watched live content every month, with live video traffic accounting for nearly 23% of all internet video traffic (Business Research Insights, 2026). These figures affirm that technological progress no longer merely affects how people communicate, but has also created new economic opportunities that turn digital interaction into a high-value commodity.

This shift positions content creators as productive economic actors rather than mere entertainment providers. Indonesia occupies a highly strategic position within this ecosystem. The value of the national creator economy is projected to surge from USD 38.5 billion in 2025 to USD 112.7 billion in 2031, growing at a CAGR of 19.7% (Mobility Foresights, 2025). Indonesia itself has more than 12 million content creators who produce up to one million pieces of content every month—the highest output in Southeast Asia (Campaign Asia, 2025). YouTube is the platform with the largest potential reach, namely 139 million users (DataReportal, 2025). Behind these dazzling figures, however, lies an inequality that warrants careful attention. In 2024, approximately 17 million people identified themselves as content creators, eight million of whom treated it as their main occupation, yet their average income was only around 63% of the national minimum wage (Inside Indonesia, 2025). This inequality underscores that the capacity to convert audience attention into a decent income remains highly dependent on content creators' ability to build engagement.

In seeking an answer to this inequality, the researcher sought to examine one live streaming program that has attracted considerable attention in Indonesia, namely Marapthon. The program is a

non-stop, subathon-format live streaming program on YouTube initiated by Reza Oktovian (Reza Arap or YB) together with the AAA Clan. Marapthon turns every viewer interaction, donation, or subscription into an extension of the broadcast duration. The program grew from 34 days of uninterrupted streaming in Season 1 in 2024, to 69 days in Season 2 in 2025, and to approximately 102 non-stop days in Season 3 in 2026, titled "The Last Tale" (Malang Inspirasi, 2026). The most striking feature of Marapthon Season 3 is the speed of its penetration: since its premiere on 8 February 2026, YB's YouTube channel broke into the world's number-one Most Watched Channels ranking within just six days, maintaining a stable average of 150,000 to 200,000 concurrent viewers (Streams Charts, 2026). From an academic standpoint, this phenomenon is compelling because its success rests not solely on duration or production, but also on emotional resonance and community. This wave grew even larger because Marapthon Season 3 was dedicated to Reza Arap's late partner. Viewers followed the live broadcast not merely for entertainment but as a form of moral support, sympathy, and solidarity. The blend of casual conversation, games, and emotional moments succeeded in building a highly active, loyal community and drew millions of watch hours (Malang Inspirasi, 2026). With such distinctive characteristics, Marapthon constitutes a rich bounded case worthy of in-depth study. This research positions it as the primary unit of analysis for understanding how particular strategies can generate engagement on a scale rarely achieved by conventional marketing practitioners.

To dissect the mechanisms behind this intensity of engagement, this study draws on Parasocial Interaction Theory, introduced by Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl (1956) through their seminal article, "Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance," published in the journal Psychiatry. The theory explains the one-sided relationship that audience members build toward media figures, in which viewers feel they know the figure as a friend even though the figure is unaware of the viewers' existence (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Its relevance becomes even stronger in the context of live streaming, because the live-broadcast format shifts the classic nature of the parasocial relationship. Traditional parasocial relationships are entirely one-sided, whereas live streaming and its social media tools open opportunities for reciprocal interaction between viewers and the streamer. The relationship shifts toward a "one-and-a-half-sided" form that leads many viewers to perceive their relationship with the streamer as a meaningful friendship (Kowert & Daniel, 2021). So that this psychological mechanism can be linked to marketing, the parasocial theory is reinforced with the concept of consumer brand engagement, understood as a consumer's positively valenced cognitive, emotional, and behavioral activity during or related to interactions with a focal object (Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014).

Studies of live streaming viewer engagement have thus far been dominated by quantitative research based on Western gaming platforms such as Twitch, using a social-motivation approach. The study by Hilvert-Bruce, Neill, Sjöblom, and Hamari (2018), for instance, tested a socio-motivational model grounded in Uses and Gratifications Theory on 2,227 Twitch users. They found that social interaction and a sense of community drove nearly all forms of engagement. Such research rarely examines non-stop marathon-format streaming cases, seldom departs from the context of Asian creators—particularly Indonesia—and tends to overlook the emotional-communal dimension that is precisely the engine of Marapthon. Consequently, there is as yet no study that specifically dissects the engagement strategies of a globally scaled Indonesian streaming phenomenon and translates them into practical input for marketers. It is this gap that feels increasingly urgent to fill, especially when the digital creative sector has become one of the drivers of the national economy while the average creator's monetization capacity remains low.

Building on this gap and urgency, this study offers two novelties: empirically, it is one of the earliest studies to make Marapthon the unit of analysis for marketing engagement strategies; theoretically, it extends the application of Parasocial Interaction Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956) from the realm of classical mass communication to the context of interactive subathons while linking it to the consumer brand engagement framework (Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014). Accordingly, this study aims to identify and analyze the strategies used in Marapthon to enhance engagement, so that they can be formulated into input for marketers in achieving the engagement needed to support their product goals, whether goods or services. Ultimately, by placing humane interaction and community at the core of digital economic value, this study also contributes to the broader conversation on Digital Economy, Human Dignity, and Inclusive Transformation in Asia, namely how the digital economy in Asia can grow while continuing to place humanity's relational dignity as an inclusive source of value.

Literature Review

Digital Economy, Live Streaming, and Creator Monetization

Live streaming is one of the pillars of the digital economy, transforming the one-way broadcast model into a real-time interactive experience in which the streamer and viewers interact simultaneously through video, live chat, and the giving of gifts or donations. This model has developed into a direct sales and marketing channel, where real-time interaction has been shown to build both consumer trust and engagement toward sellers in social commerce (Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut, 2020). From the viewers' side, the decision to keep watching a live broadcast is driven not merely by content quality but by their closeness to the streamer as well as to the community of fellow viewers (Hu, Zhang, & Wang, 2017). It is within this ecosystem that creator monetization mechanisms—through donations, subscriptions, and the subathon format that makes viewer support the determinant of broadcast duration—place engagement as the key variable linking digital cultural activity to economic value.

Engagement and Consumer Brand Engagement

The concept of engagement in the marketing literature departs from the understanding that the consumer's relationship with an object does not end at the transaction, but is formed through repeated interactive experiences and value co-creation. Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić, and Ilić (2011) formulated the concept of customer engagement as a psychological state that arises from a consumer's interactive experiences with an object (a brand, organization, or community) within a particular service relationship. This concept was later operationalized more specifically for the social media domain by Hollebeek, Glynn, and Brodie (2014) through the consumer brand engagement (CBE) construct, which comprises three indicators: cognitive processing, affection, and activation. It is this three-dimensional framework that this study uses to interpret "engagement" not merely as a metric of viewer numbers, but as cognitive, emotional, and behavioral involvement that drives real viewer action.

Parasocial Interaction Theory as the Grand Theory

Parasocial Interaction Theory, introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956), serves as the grand theory of this study. The theory explains how viewers build a relationship that feels personal and intimate toward a media figure, even though that relationship is one-sided and the figure does not know the viewers (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Subsequent development affirmed that parasocial interaction is a measurable experience in which viewers feel as though they are being addressed directly by the media figure (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). In the context of live streaming, the classic nature of the one-way relationship shifts; the presence of reciprocal interaction channels such as live chat and donations that can be accompanied by messages gives rise to what is called the "one-and-a-half-sided parasocial relationship." This relationship is marked by the potential for reciprocal communication, strong community affiliation, wishful identification, and high emotional engagement (Kowert & Daniel, 2021). It is this shift that makes parasocial theory highly relevant for dissecting how the emotional bonds in Marapthon are formed and capitalized into engagement.

Viewer Engagement Motivation: The Uses and Gratifications Perspective

To explain why viewers actively select and remain with a particular broadcast, this study also draws on the Uses and Gratifications tradition, which views the audience as active media users oriented toward the fulfillment of specific needs (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). In the context of live streaming, a number of empirical studies have identified such varied motivations: research on Twitch users found that the motivations for watching others play games include cognitive and affective gratification, social integration, and tension release (Sjöblom & Hamari, 2017), while viewer engagement specifically has been shown to be driven by social motivations such as interaction and a sense of community (Hilvert-Bruce, Neill, Sjöblom, & Hamari, 2018). These motivations converge on a dual-identification mechanism, namely viewers' identification with the streamer as well as with the group of fellow viewers, which drives the intention to keep watching (Hu, Zhang, & Wang, 2017). This perspective complements parasocial theory by explaining the functional drivers behind the engagement that is formed.

Live Streaming Strategies in the Marketing Context

In the realm of practice, the engagement built through live streaming has tangible marketing implications. Interactivity, shopping value, and trust formed during a live broadcast have been shown to increase consumer engagement toward sellers, which in turn affects purchase intention and loyalty (Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut, 2020). Thus, strategies for building engagement—whether through personal greetings, acknowledgment of donations, the formation of community rituals, or the management of emotional moments—can be understood as marketing resources that can be imitated and adapted by business actors. However, the existing literature tends to situate live streaming within the context of social commerce, and little research has examined engagement strategies in non-stop, marathon-format live streaming of a massive scale with a strong emotional-communal charge such as Marapthon.

Conceptual Framework

From the discussion above, this study constructs an analytical framework that combines three layers of understanding: Parasocial Interaction Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Kowert & Daniel, 2021) as the explanation of why viewers' emotional bonds are formed; the Uses and Gratifications perspective (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973; Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018) as the explanation of the motivation behind engagement; and the consumer brand engagement construct (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek et al., 2014) as the explanation of the form and impact of engagement relevant to marketing. These three layers serve as the lens for reading and categorizing the engagement strategies in Marapthon, while affirming the position of this literature review as a theoretical framework rather than a research method.

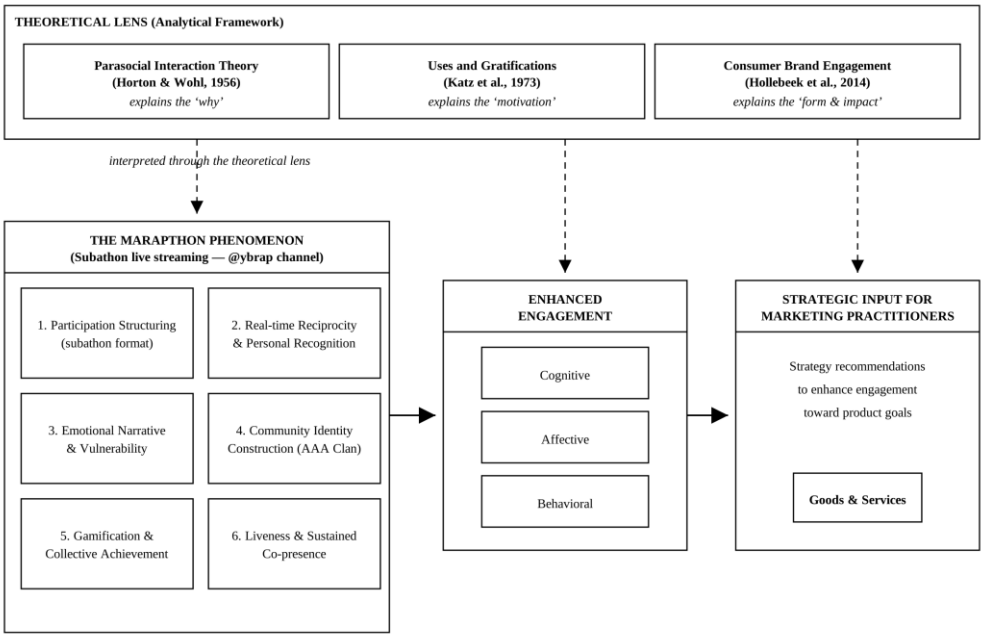


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Research

Source: processed by the researcher with the assistance of Claude.ai (2026)

Research Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design (qualitative case study). The case study was chosen because this research seeks to answer the question of how a contemporary phenomenon unfolds within its real-life context, when the boundary between phenomenon and context cannot be sharply separated and the researcher has no control over the events observed (Yin, 2018). The design used is a single-case holistic design, with Marapthon as a clearly bounded case. This approach aligns with the qualitative research tradition that emphasizes an in-depth understanding of meaning and process rather than statistical generalization (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Stake, 1995).

The object of this research is Marapthon. The case is bounded to the staging of Marapthon Season 3 titled "The Last Tale," which premiered on 8 February 2026, because this edition represents the program's peak achievement while also marking its conclusion. The unit of analysis is the engagement

strategies applied throughout the broadcast, whether verbal, visual, interactional, or structural (such as the donation-based duration-extension mechanism). This study uses two categories of data sources. First, primary data consisting of (a) the archive of Marapthon live broadcasts on the @ybrap channel as the main object of analysis (Reza Arap [@ybrap], 2026), and (b) broadcast performance metrics compiled from the analytics platform Streams Charts, covering peak and average concurrent viewers, hours watched, duration, and channel ranking (Streams Charts, 2026). Second, secondary data in the form of supporting documentation such as media coverage and community posts, used to contextualize and cross-verify the findings from the primary data.\

Data collection was carried out through three complementary techniques. First, documentation and observation of the broadcast archive, analyzed using qualitative content analysis procedures to systematically and reproducibly identify and code the units of engagement strategy (Krippendorff, 2018). Second, netnographic observation of community interaction in the live chat and the AAA Clan's social spaces, in order to capture the cultural dynamics, norms, and rituals that sustain engagement (Kozinets, 2020). Third, the compilation of descriptive-quantitative data from Streams Charts as an indicator of engagement intensity. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following six phases: familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The coding results of the engagement strategies were then interpreted through the theoretical framework built in the literature review, so that the identified strategies could be mapped into cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions and formulated into propositions adaptable by marketers

Research Findings and Discussion

The qualitative content analysis of the Marapthon Season 3 broadcast archive on the @ybrap channel, triangulated with netnographic observation of community interaction and performance metrics from Streams Charts, yielded six interrelated engagement strategies. Quantitatively, the program's scale of engagement was extraordinary: YB's channel broke into the world's number-one Most Watched Channels ranking within just six days of the Marapthon Season 3 premiere and maintained a stable average of 150,000–200,000 concurrent viewers throughout the broadcast (Streams Charts, 2026; Reza Arap [@ybrap], 2026). This achievement indicates that the following strategies genuinely succeeded in converting attention into massive and sustained engagement. The six strategies are summarized in Table 1 and then discussed one by one in relation to the theoretical framework that has been built.

Table 1. Marapthon Engagement Strategies, Theoretical Lens, and Marketing Implications

Engagement Strategy	Manifestation in Marapthon	Theoretical Lens	Marketing Implication
Participation structuring through the subathon	Donations, subscriptions, and interactions extend the broadcast duration, making viewers parties that help determine the program’s length.	The activation indicator in CBE; one-and-a-half-sided PSR	Co-creation mechanisms: giving customers room to help create value for a product.
Real-time feedback & personal recognition	Mentioning the names of viewers who comment or donate; direct responses to donations and viewer comments.	Parasocial interaction (PSI)	Personalization at scale; responsive interactive service.
Emotional narrative	Dedication to a late partner; openness of emotion and shared grief.	The affection indicator in CBE; deep PSR	Authentic brand narrative and purpose; (ethical) emotional storytelling.

Engagement Strategy	Manifestation in Marapthon	Theoretical Lens	Marketing Implication
Community identity construction, namely the AAA Clan	Shared identity, distinctive language (e.g., YXGC), and signature emoticons.	Dual identification; social integration	Building a brand community with a sense of belonging, not merely followers.
Gamification & collective achievement	Donation targets for specific events, countdowns, and the shared pursuit of a world ranking record.	Vicarious achievement; tension release	Target-based campaigns; collective challenges with visible progress.
Liveness & sustained co-presence	The non-stop presence of AAA Clan members on the channel cultivates habituated viewing.	PSI sustained over time	Consistent presence (always-on) and keeping in touch.

Source: results of the researcher's analysis (2026).

Engagement Strategies in Marapthon and Their Marketing Implications

Participation structuring through the subathon format

The first finding is that the subathon format is not merely a technical procedure but an engagement engine that positions viewers as parties that help determine the continuity of the broadcast: every donation, subscription, or interaction adds to the streaming duration, so that the program's lifespan is literally determined by the collective action of the audience. This mechanism activates the behavioral dimension (activation) of consumer brand engagement, namely the viewers' investment of time, energy, and resources toward the object of engagement (Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014). Furthermore, the feedback loop consisting of "viewer action → broadcast change → streamer response" is the most concrete embodiment of the one-and-a-half-sided parasocial relationship, where communication that was once one-way becomes reciprocal (Kowert & Daniel, 2021). For marketers, the key lesson is to design mechanisms in which customer action can help produce a visible and direct impact on a shared outcome. One example is a coffee shop opening a vote for a new variant, with interim results displayed on an Instagram story or an in-store board, and the winning variant actually produced.

Real-time feedback and personal recognition

The second strategy is real-time personal recognition, for instance through mentioning donors' names, direct responses to comments, and greetings that make viewers feel personally addressed. This practice strengthens parasocial interaction as conceptualized in the experience of viewers feeling as though they are being addressed directly by a media figure (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011), while transforming the one-way relationship into a bond that feels reciprocal and meaningful (Kowert & Daniel, 2021). In the marketing context, this finding demonstrates the importance of personalization at scale, namely that individual recognition of customers and responsive interaction have been shown to foster trust and engagement toward sellers in the digital marketing space (Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut, 2020). For example, a seller replies quickly and personally in direct messages or comment sections. A culinary MSME, for instance, might answer a complaint on Instagram within minutes while referring to the customer's specific order: "We're so sorry, April—the sambal in yesterday's order fell short. We'll resend it tomorrow." A fast and specific response makes the customer believe their complaint is genuinely heard, rather than merely answered by a chatbot.

Emotional narrative

The third strategy—which the researcher regards as the one that most distinguishes Marapthon—is the use of an authentic emotional narrative. Marapthon Season 3 was dedicated to Reza Arap's late partner, so that shared emotion and grief became the core of the viewing experience (Reza Arap

[@ybrap], 2026). This emotional dimension awakens the affection dimension of engagement (Hollebeek et al., 2014) and pushes the parasocial relationship to a profound level, approaching the condition described by Horton and Wohl (1956) when a media figure becomes a source of a sense of security for the audience. The solidarity born from it explains why many viewers were present as a form of moral support rather than merely seeking entertainment. For marketers, this affirms the importance of the power of authentic brand narrative and purpose. Yet this finding also demands ethical caution: marketers must not capitalize on grief manipulatively, because such action would instead erode relational dignity. For example, a drinking-water brand sends aid to an earthquake site without much publicity and only reports it after distribution is complete. This action is consistent with its brand purpose, namely access to clean water.

Community identity construction (AAA Clan)

The fourth strategy is the construction of a strong community identity around the AAA Clan, marked by distinctive language (e.g., YXGC, blay, brewek), signature emoticons, and a sense of togetherness among viewers. This finding aligns with the dual-identification framework, namely engagement that grows from viewers' identification with the streamer as well as with the group of fellow viewers (Hu, Zhang, & Wang, 2017). From the motivational angle, community fulfills the need for social integration as proposed by the uses and gratifications tradition (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973), and empirically, social interaction and a sense of togetherness have been shown to be the main drivers of live broadcast viewer engagement (Sjöblom & Hamari, 2017; Hilvert-Bruce, Neill, Sjöblom, & Hamari, 2018). The implication for marketers is to shift from merely accumulating followers toward building a brand community with a genuine identity and sense of belonging. For instance, a product involves customers in design voting, features a "member spotlight," and grants early access to new collections for loyal buyers. This makes customers feel they partly "own" the brand rather than merely buying clothes. This approach is more effective than merely paying numerous influencers for endorsements to make an account trend quickly.

Gamification and collective achievement

The fifth strategy is gamification through targets, countdowns, and, above all, the pursuit of a world record. Marapthon made the attainment of the world's number-one ranking a shared mission that bound viewers together (Streams Charts, 2026). Such collective achievement cultivates a sense of vicarious achievement, namely the feeling of accomplishing something through the success of the figure and their community, which strengthens the bond with both the streamer and the community (Kowert & Daniel, 2021), while also fulfilling the needs for relaxation and achievement recognized in viewer motivation studies (Sjöblom & Hamari, 2017). For marketers, this finding suggests using target-based campaigns and collective challenges with visible progress indicators to sustain engagement momentum. In Marapthon, the AAA Clan typically set several targets. For example, they announced that if the broadcast surpassed 100,000 viewers, they would jump into the water or collaborate with a particular creator.

Liveness and sustained co-presence

The sixth strategy is the use of liveness, namely the uninterrupted presence of the streamers over a very long duration, which ultimately cultivates a habituated co-presence among viewers. Viewers return regularly because the broadcast is "always there." This continuity keeps parasocial interaction alive over time, transforming the moment of viewing into a ritualized habit (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Hu et al., 2017). In marketing practice, this principle affirms the value of a consistent presence (always-on) and keeping in touch in building long-term engagement, rather than relying on sporadic campaigns. For example, an MSME conducts live product-sales broadcasts on a fixed schedule, such as every night at 8:00 p.m., so that viewers have a regular "appointment." Between those schedules, it continues to greet them through stories.

The Marapthon Engagement Model

These six strategies do not stand alone but form a mutually supportive system between the structural layer (subathon, gamification, and liveness) and the relational layer (feedback, emotional narrative, and community). When mapped onto this study's framework, parasocial interaction theory

explains why viewers' bonds are so deep; the uses and gratifications perspective explains the motivation that makes viewers come and stay; while the consumer brand engagement construct explains the form and impact of engagement in the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions relevant to marketing (Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić, & Ilić, 2011; Hollebeek et al., 2014). The uniqueness of Marapthon lies in the fusion of a structural monetization mechanism (subathon) with an intense emotional-communal narrative—a combination that produces engagement on a scale rarely achieved by conventional marketing practice.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the Marapthon phenomenon initiated by Reza Arap Oktovian (YB) demonstrates how the advancement of live streaming technology has transformed into a new economic force whose success rests on the capacity to build engagement, and through a qualitative case study approach to the @ybrap channel archive and Streams Charts metrics, six mutually reinforcing engagement strategies were identified—namely participation structuring through the subathon format, real-time feedback and personal recognition, authentic emotional narrative, community identity construction, gamification and collective achievement, and sustained liveness and co-presence—which, when interpreted through the framework of Parasocial Interaction Theory, the Uses and Gratifications perspective, and the consumer brand engagement construct, reveal that Marapthon's massive engagement was born from the fusion of structural mechanisms with deep relational and emotional bonds, so that these six strategies can be formulated into practical input for marketers of both goods and services in designing engagement as a humane, authentic, and sustainable form of co-creation to achieve their product goals, while affirming that an inclusive digital economy must rest on humanity's relational dignity as its primary source of value.

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