Engaging fans in social media through team brand associations: the mediating role of sport team identification
Involucrar a los aficionados en las redes sociales a través de las asociaciones con la marca del equipo: el papel mediador de la identificación con el equipo deportivo

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Abstract

Introduction: Because of the importance of having engaged sport fans on social media, research has also focused on the antecedents of fan social media engagement.
Objective: The purpose of the present study was to investigate the relationship between team brand associations (i.e., benefits, product related attributes, and non-product related attributes) and individuals' engagement with their favorite team on social media (i.e., consumption, contribution, and creation activities), while also considering the mediating role of sport team identification.
Methodology: A quantitative approach was followed by using an electronic questionnaire, which was disseminated through a football-related Facebook page. The sample consisted of 213 fans of football teams who were followers of this page.
Results: The findings indicated that benefits predicted the consumption and contribution dimensions of social media engagement, while non-product related attributes predicted only the consumption facet. Benefits and non-product related attributes were also found to be related to sport team identification. Sport team identification was shown to be associated with benefits and non-product related attributes, while it also acted as a mediating variable in the relationships between benefits and social media dimensions and in the relationships between non-product related and social media engagement dimensions.
Conclusions: This research uncovers how team brand associations can be related to fan social media engagement and offers practical implications to sport managers aiming to engage their fans on social media.

Keywords

Social media engagement; sport fans; sport team identification; team brand associations.

Resumen

Introducción: Debido a la importancia de contar con aficionados al deporte comprometidos en las redes sociales, la investigación también se ha centrado en los antecedentes del compromiso de los fanáticos en dichas plataformas.
Objetivo: El propósito del presente estudio fue investigar la relación entre las asociaciones de marca del equipo (es decir, beneficios, atributos relacionados con el producto y atributos no relacionados con el producto) y el compromiso de los individuos con su equipo favorito en las redes sociales (es decir, actividades de consumo, contribución y creación), considerando también el papel mediador de la identificación con el equipo deportivo
Metodología: Se siguió un enfoque cuantitativo mediante el uso de un cuestionario electrónico, el cual fue difundido a través de una página de Facebook relacionada con el fútbol. La muestra estuvo compuesta por 213 aficionados de equipos de fútbol que eran seguidores de dicha página.
Resultados: Los resultados indicaron que los beneficios predecían las dimensiones de consumo y contribución del compromiso en redes sociales, mientras que los atributos no relacionados con el producto solo predecían la faceta de consumo. También se encontró que los beneficios y los atributos no relacionados con el producto estaban relacionados con la identificación con el equipo deportivo. Se demostró que la identificación con el equipo deportivo estaba asociada con los beneficios y los atributos no relacionados con el producto, y que además actuaba como una variable mediadora en las relaciones entre los beneficios y las dimensiones del compromiso en redes sociales, así como en las relaciones entre los atributos no relacionados con el producto y las dimensiones del compromiso en redes sociales.
Conclusiones: Esta investigación revela cómo las asociaciones de marca del equipo pueden estar relacionadas con el compromiso de los fanáticos en las redes sociales y ofrece implicaciones prácticas para los gestores deportivos que buscan involucrar a sus aficionados en dichas plataformas.

Palabras clave

Compromiso en redes sociales; aficionados al deporte; identificación con el equipo deportivo; asociaciones de marca del equipo.

Introduction

For many individuals, a central part of their daily routine involves following sports on social networking sites (SNSs) (Su et al., 2021). Fans' utilization of SNSs can range from passive behaviors (e.g., reading posts about a favorite sport team on its SNSs accounts) to more active ones, such as commenting on the team's posts or disseminating related content (Vale & Fernandes, 2018). This widespread use of SNSs by individuals has led sports organizations to reallocate their resources toward developing online relationships and engaging with fans on their platforms (Ahiabor et al., 2023). Authors agree that the interactive nature of SNSs provides an appropriate vehicle for customer empowerment (Dolan et al., 2016) and for co-creating value propositions (van Doorn et al., 2010). In the case of sport fans, research has shown that sport teams can benefit from having highly engaged fans on their SNSs, as such individuals are more likely to exhibit positive behavioral intentions, both offline and online (Santos et al., 2019; Steiner et al., 2023). Apart from behavioral intentions, Yoshida et al. (2018) found that social media engagement is associated with fans' actual behavior, such as the number of games attended over a specific time period.

Due to the significant consequences of social media engagement for sports teams, several authors have shifted their focus to the factors affecting this construct. For instance, studies have concentrated on the motives that can predict fans' social media engagement (Fernández-Martínez et al., 2022; Vale & Fernandes, 2018) and on the types of social media content that can encourage more active fan participation (Annamalai et al., 2021). Even though this stream of research has advanced the understanding of what types of messages (e.g., informative, social, etc.) sport marketers should adopt in their social media content strategies to increase fans' digital engagement, further research is needed to determine what specific content could be included in the teams' posts. Authors have pointed out that existing research has not fully explored the range of antecedents to fan engagement (Cao & Matsuoka, 2024; McDonald et al., 2022).

To achieve the above targets, the present study intends to explore the relationship between team brand associations (i.e., anything that individuals associate with the team in their minds; Aaker, 1991) and fans' engagement behaviors on social media toward their favorite team. Evidence exists that team brand associations are related to fan behavior (Kunkel et al., 2016; Wear et al., 2018). In regard to the scope of the present study, although prior efforts have investigated fans' online responses (e.g., like, share, comment) to teams' posts related to team brand associations (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Maderer et al., 2018; Parganas et al., 2015, 2017), these studies have not examined if and how fans' positive perception about the associations they linked to the team can predict social media engagement. In other words, fans may engage with their favorite team both on the team's social media and on their own, driven by the positive associations they hold with the team.

Besides the direct effect of team brand associations on social media engagement, the present study also seeks to investigate the mediating role of sport team identification. While prior research (e.g., Wear et al., 2018) found that identification mediates the relationship between team associations and fan behaviors, such as merchandise purchases, media consumption, and attendance, as far as the present study is concerned, no study to date has explored such relationships with respect to social media engagement behaviors. Investigating possible mediation effects is important, as it can help practitioners understand whether they should also focus on fostering team identification to enhance social media engagement rather than relying entirely on team brand associations.

Building on the above discussion and based on Keller's (1993) categorization of brand associations and Online Brand Related Activities (COBRAs) framework proposed by Muntinga et al. (2011), this study aims to examine the relationship between team brand associations and individuals' engagement with their favorite team on its social media, as well as on their own, while also considering the mediating function of sport team identification. At the theoretical level, the study seeks to deepen knowledge of whether and how each category of team brand associations can predict fans' social media engagement behaviors associated with the COBRAs framework. Identifying which team brand associations need to be strengthened to drive online fan engagement, along with recognition of the role of team identification in this relationship, can assist practitioners in developing effective strategies to enhance fans' digital behaviors for the team's benefit.

Theoretical background

Fan social media engagement

Customer engagement has been approached through two basic conceptualizations. The first approach treats customer engagement as a multidimensional construct that includes cognitive (e.g., thoughts), affective (e.g., feelings), and behavioral (e.g., actions) facets of engagement (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek, 2011), while the second concentrates on the behavioral aspect of the concept (van Doorn et al., 2010; Verhoef et al., 2010). In line with the behavioral viewpoint of customer engagement, Yoshida et al. (2014) argued that fan engagement represents non-transactional extra-role sport fan behaviors. Such behaviors may encompass supporting fellow fans regarding team-related matters, participating in team rituals, cooperating with the team's management, and engaging with the team through its social media platforms (see McDonald et al., 2022; Yoshida et al., 2014). Most sport fan research has supported the behavioral approach to customer engagement (e.g., Behnam et al., 2023; Pradhan et al., 2020; Winell, 2023). To this end, notwithstanding the cognitive and affective components of engagement, this study also adopted the behavioral manifestation of customer engagement by following van Doorn et al.'s (2010) definition of customer engagement, which refers to "customers' behavioural manifestations toward a brand or firm, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers" (p. 254).

The behavioral conceptualization of customer engagement has also been followed in studies about fans' social media reactions (Machado et al., 2020; Vale & Fernandes, 2018; Yoshida et al., 2018), which represent an expression of fan engagement (McDonald et al., 2022). The attention on a specific manifestation of customer engagement is consistent with the notion that since customers can interact, whether offline or online, with several elements associated with the company (e.g., value propositions, other customers, organizational processes, and media channels), customer engagement needs to be viewed as context-specific (Brodie et al., 2011; Dolan et al., 2016). Therefore, research should focus on specific forms of the construct (e.g., social media), which can generate a more nuanced understanding (Dolan et al., 2016).

Schivinski et al. (2016) defined social media engagement as "a set of brand-related online activities on the part of the consumer that vary in the degree to which the consumer interacts with SNS and engages in the consumption, contribution, and creation of media content" (p. 66). A widely cited framework in examining social media engagement, which has also been applied in the team sports setting (e.g., Ahiabor et al., 2023; Vale & Femandes, 2018), concerns the Consumers Online Brand Related Activities (COBRAs) framework (Muntinga et al., 2011). Based on the work of Shao (2009), the COBRAs framework conceptualizes a range of social media behaviors – ranging from passive to active engagement – structured within a three-level hierarchical model, embracing activities such as consumption, contribution, and creation (Muntinga et al., 2011; Schivinski et al., 2016). Consumption refers to actions characterized by minimum levels of engagement, representing the most prevalent pattern of user interaction (Muntinga et al., 2011), such as reading posts on the team's SNSs. Contribution represents a mid-level of engagement concerning activities such as commenting, sharing, or liking posts in the team's SNSs. The most active form of engagement, labeled creation, involves fans' high-level participatory activities such as composing posts and sharing images or videos related to the team on their personal SNSs.

Social media engagement and Team brand associations

Brand associations denote anything that is stored in customers' memory concerning a brand (e.g., perceptions, impressions, and emotions associated with the brand's physical and non-physical characteristics) (Aaker, 1991). Aaker pointed out that brand associations can contribute to brand differentiation. In addition, Keller (2003) stressed the importance for sport marketers of acknowledging those brand associations that are perceived as positive by customers to identify which ones should be emphasized in their initiatives. The most widely used conceptualization of brand associations – also successfully adopted in the context of sport teams by Gladden and Funk (2002) and subsequent studies (e.g., Bauer et al., 2008; Parganas et al., 2017; Wear et al., 2018) – is that proposed by Keller (1993). According to this theorization, brand associations can be separated into three basic categories: attributes, benefits, and attitudes. Attributes refer to the features associated with the product or service and are separated

into product related, which pertain to the brand's performance or function (e.g., head coach, star players) and non-product related, which are considered supplementary and not closely tied to the brand's performance or function (e.g., logo and colors, stadium). The second category, benefits, captures the value customers expect from brand consumption (e.g., socialization, excitement). Finally, attitudes, defined as "consumers' overall evaluations of a brand" (Keller, 1993, p. 4), are more accurately viewed as outcomes of both attributes and benefits (Bauer et al., 2008; Trail et al., 2023).

As mentioned previously, positive perceptions of team brand associations can guide fans' behaviors in favor of the team. In regard to online behaviors, studies have shown that sport fans tend to respond to teams' social media messages that reflect associations with the team (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Maderer et al., 2018; Parganas et al., 2015, 2017). However, such efforts have not particularly focused on the effect of brand association on social media engagement and have concentrated mostly on the intermediate level of engagement behaviors (e.g., contribution activities). Understanding the relationship between the two variables is important, as individuals may engage with their team on its SNSs, as well as on their own accounts, due to positive impressions of team brand associations that have been stored in their minds – whether those associations are actively promoted by the team online or offline. Findings from other domains supported that customers' social media engagement, expressed by the COBRAs framework, can be predicted by favorable brand associations (Schivinski et al., 2021). Schivinski et al. stated that "as long as brand-related social media communication leads to satisfactory customer associations, such communication should trigger positive responses in customers as recipients and stimulate behavioral engagement with brand-related social media content" (p. 7). Based on the above, the following hypothesis is formed:

H1: Team brand associations are associated with fans' social media engagement toward their favorite team.

The mediating role of sport team identification

Sport team identification represents the psychological bond that can be developed between individuals and their favorite sport team (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). This concept has its roots in social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which posits that individuals' sense of who they are is influenced by the social groups to which they perceive themselves as belonging. Feelings of group membership can motivate supportive behaviors in favor of the group (Ashmore et al., 2004). Indeed, sport team identification has been widely investigated within the realm of sport fandom and is considered a pivotal variable in explaining fans' behaviors (Kwon et al., 2022). These behaviors further encompass the use of the team's SNSs by fans (Moyer et al., 2015).

Research has also demonstrated that identification with a sport team serves as a mediating factor in various relationships within the sport fan literature, helping to explain the connections between key variables (e.g., Madrigal & Chen, 2010; Wear et al., 2018). This might also be the case in the team brand associations/social media engagement relationship. Wear et al. (2018) found that the associations that fans maintain about their favorite team can predict team identification and that team identification mediates the effect of associations on fans' behaviors, such as merchandise purchases, media consumption, and attendance. These authors argued that individuals have to experience a meaningful psychological connection with their team, which can be fostered by strong perceptions of the team's associations, in order for these associations to be able to effectively shape their behavior in relation to the team. The present study seeks to extend the investigation of such relationships by focusing on fans' behaviors toward their favorite team as defined by the COBRAs framework. Hence, the following hypotheses were developed.

H2: Team brand associations are associated with sport team identification

H3: Sport team identification is associated with fans' social media engagement toward their favorite team.

H4: Sport team identification mediates the relationship between team brand associations and fans' social media engagement toward their favorite team.

Method

Procedure and participants

The survey was distributed via a Greek football (i.e., soccer) focused Facebook page, selected based on the assumption that its audience would likely be interested in football and football teams. This page primarily focuses on Greek football teams from the country's top division. Page administrators were contacted and requested to share a survey participation link with their audience.

Participants who opted to take part were directed to the Google Forms platform. After receiving detailed information about the study's purpose, they were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. Their informed consent was obtained through an active confirmation process before accessing the survey. To ensure data integrity and security, all collected information was stored in a password-protected format accessible only to the research team.

The sample consisted of 213 fans of Greek football teams (179 men and 31 women). This gender representation was not a surprise, as it aligns with findings from previous studies on Greek sport fandom (e.g., Lianopoulos et al., 2021; Theodorakis et al., 2012; Tsigilis et al., 2023). The mean age was 36.22 years (SD = 13.84). The majority of the sample were singles (61%, n=130), employees of the private sector (43.7%, n=93), had a higher education degree (39.9%, n=121), and their monthly income was between 1.001-2.000€ (44.6%, n=95).

Instrument

Team brand associations were approached based on the scale of Gladden and Funk (2002). Specifically, 12 items were used to capture the three categories of team brand associations: benefits (four items concerning diversion, excitement, pride in place, and socialization), product related attributes (four items concerning aesthetic play, head coach, success, and star players), and non-product related attributes (four items concerning information provision, logo & colors, relationship building, and stadium). The 10-item Sport Team Identification Scale (STIS; Tsigilis et al., 2023) was used to assess the levels of sport team identification. Finally, a modified version of Schivinski et al.'s (2016) instrument was employed to capture the dimensions of social media engagement (three items for consumption, six for contribution, and four for creation). The items regarding team brand associations and social media engagement were measured on a seven-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), while the STIS was measured on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (to a great extent).

Data analysis

In line with Trail et al. (2023) and Kunkel et al. (2016, 2017), team brand associations were treated as formative constructs, while sport team identification and social media engagement were considered reflective. Due to the relatively small sample size and the presence of formative measures in the model, Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed using SmartPLS version 4 (Hair et al., 2011, 2016). Hair et al. (2021) supported the utility of this analysis over covariance-based SEM when dealing with small sample sizes. The employment of such an approach is consistent with previous studies on sport consumer behavior and elsewhere that have utilized comparable sample sizes and employed PLS-SEM (e.g., Afriani & Sepdanius, 2024; Lianopoulos et al., 2024; Toudert & Bringas-Rábago, 2018). Moreover, according to Hair et al. (2021), the model's complexity has little effect on minimum sample size requirements, as "the PLS-SEM algorithm does not compute all relationships in the structural model at the same time" (p. 16).

A two-step procedure was followed. First, the two measurement models (formative and reflective) were evaluated, followed by an assessment of the direct and indirect effects within the proposed structural model. In accordance with Hair et al. (2016), a bootstrapping method with 5,000 resamples was applied.

Results

Formative constructs measurement assessment

To empirically verify the theoretical reasoning concerning the formative nature of team brand associations in the current data, a confirmatory tetrad analysis was initially performed (CTA-PLS; Gudergan et al., 2008). The results showed that almost all tetrads have significant values. According to Sarstedt et al. (2014), if at least one of the tetrads is statistically significant, there is evidence that the construct follows a formative structure. Consequently, the results of the CTA-PLS confirmed the theoretical argument that the three categories of team brand associations can be considered formative constructs. Regarding the measurement model assessment (Table 1), all Variance inflation factor (VIF) values were less than 3.3, signifying the absence of multicollinearity (Diamantopoulos & Siguaw, 2006). Also, since all factor loadings exceeded the value of 0.50, no item was excluded from further analysis (Hair et al., 2017).

Table 1. Measurement model results for the formative constructs

Variable	M	SD	Loading	VIF
Team brand associations				
Benefits	4.940	1.421		
1. Diversion: The team provides me with a break/escape from my daily routine			0.727	2.515
2. Excitement: Following the team is very exciting			0.976	2.438
3. Pride in place: The team brings prestige to the host community			0.628	1.684
4. Socialization: The team provides the chance to socialize and interact with friends and others			0.770	1.854
Product related attributes	5.132	1.182		
1. Aesthetic play: The team plays games that typically have a natural beauty			0.692	3.166
2. Head coach: The head coach/ team manager does a good job			0.680	2.401
3. Success: The team is very successful			0.841	1.405
4. Star players: The team has some outstanding players			0.868	2.625
Non-product related attributes	5.454	1.185		
1. Information provision: The team provides plenty of information to keep me well-informed			0.724	1.739
2. Logo & colors: I like the logo and colors of the team			0.932	1.853
3. Relationship building: I feel like the team does a good job building a solid relationship with me			0.562	1.622
4. Stadium: The team's stadium has "character"			0.756	1.692

Reflective constructs measurement assessment

The reflective constructs met the criteria of internal consistency reliability since all composite reliability (CR) and Cronbach's α values were above the 0.70 cutoff. Additionally, as all factor loadings were above 0.50 and the average variance extracted (AVE) indices were greater than 0.50, the constructs' convergent validity was ensured (see Table 2). The discriminant validity was established as the correlation coefficients and the heterotrait–monotrait ratio (HTMT) values remained below the threshold of 0.85 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Henseler et al., 2015). In addition, the square root of AVEs exceeded all corresponding correlation values (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Table 2. Measurement model results for the reflective constructs

| Variable	M	SD	α	CR	AVE	Loading
Sport team identification	2.647	0.990	0.939	0.948	0.655	
1. My team is an important part of who I am						0.895
2. I put my team above everything else						0.799
3. I am passionate about my team						0.906
4. When my team loses, I feel terrible						0.841
5. I am devoted to my team						0.848
6. It is very important for me to support my team						0.904
7. I talk about my team all the time						0.809
8. At every opportunity, I show to others that I support my team						0.755
9. I wear my team's insignia when I watch their games (e.g., either at the stadium or a sportscafé or via TV, radio, or the Internet)						0.581

10. I often overreact when it comes to the performance of my team						0.676
Social media engagement Consumption	4.99	1.903	0.944	0.944	0.899	
1. I read posts related to my team on its social media						0.959
2. I watch pictures/graphics related to my team on its social media						0.960
3. I follow my team on its social media						0.925
Contribution	2.966	1.559	0.915	0.947	0.691	
1. I comment on videos related to my team on its social media						0.811
2. I comment on posts related to my team on its social media						0.833
3. I comment on pictures/graphics related to my team on its social media						0.827
4. I share my team's related posts from its social media						0.768
5. I "Like" pictures/graphics related to my team on its social media						0.871
6. I "Like" posts related to my team on its social media						0.872
Creation	2.372	1.571	0.923	0.931	0.812	
1. I initiate posts related to my team on social network sites						0.904
2. I post pictures/graphics related to my team on social network sites						0.935
3. I post videos that show my team on social network sites						0.927
4, I write reviews related to my team on social network sites						0.836

Structural model assessment

As all VIF indices were below the 3.3 benchmark, multicollinearity was not an issue for the predictor constructs (Kock, 2015). The results of the bootstrapping analysis revealed that team brand associations and sport team identification explained 57% of the variance of consumption, 40% of the contribution, and 25% of the creation, while team brand associations explained 60% of the variance of sport team identification. More specifically, with respect to the prediction of social media engagement from team brand associations, statistically significant paths were detected in the benefits/consumption (β=0.365), benefits/contribution (β=0.234), and non-product related attributes/consumption (β=0.156) relationships, partially confirming H1 (Figure 1). Similarly, H2 was also partially supported as benefits (β=0.700) and non-product related attributes (β=0.141) had a statistically significant association with sport team identification. H3 was fully supported since sport team identification was found to predict all social media engagement dimensions (β=0.354 for consumption, β=0.370 for contribution, β=0.391 for creation). For almost all statistically significant associations, the f^2 indices showed low effect sizes (>0.02, <0.15). The only exception was the benefits/sport team identification relationship, where the effect size was large (f^2>0.35) (Cohen, 1998). Since all Q^2 values were above zero, it was concluded that the existing structural model demonstrated predictive relevance (Hair et al., 2016).

In regard to the mediating role of sport team identification, the results showed that the construct mediates the relationships between benefits and all social media engagement dimensions (β=0.241, p<0.001 for consumption, β=0.252, p<0.001 for contribution, and β=0.260, p<0.001 for creation), as well as the relationships between non-product-related attributes and social media engagement dimensions (β=0.050, p<0.05 for consumption, β=0.051, p<0.05 for contribution, and β=0.054, p<0.05 for creation), partially supporting H4, as this construct did not find to mediate any effect of product related attributes on social media engagement dimensions (β=-0.007, p>0.05 for consumption, β=-0.007, p>0.05 for contribution, and β=-0.007, p>0.05 for creation). Taking into consideration also the results of the direct effects, the findings denote partial mediation of sport team identification for the benefits/consumption, benefits/contribution, and non-product related attributes/consumption relationships, and full mediation for the benefits/creation, non-product related attributes/contribution, and non-product related attributes/creation relationships.

Figure 1. Structural model results
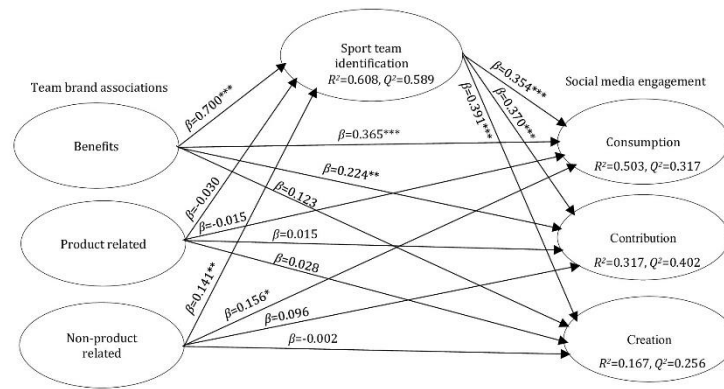
Notes: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.

Discussion

This study aimed to provide a better understanding of the relationship between team brand associations and fans' social media engagement behaviors by using sport team identification as a mediator, based on Consumers' Online Brand-Related Activities (COBRAs) framework (Muntinga et al., 2011). Specifically, the results explained how different types of brand associations (i.e., benefits, product related, non-product related) influence digital engagement and the extent to which sport team identification functions acted as a psychological mechanism. The findings partially supported the four hypotheses.

The first key inference is that the positive impact of benefits and non-product related dimensions on the development of social media engagement relies on the level of fans' team identification. Other interesting findings are: a) the direct impact of team identification on consumption, contribution, and creation, and b) the influence of benefits associations on the strengthening of consumption and contribution factors. The results are broadly consistent with the literature suggesting that favorable brand associations can influence online behaviors (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Schivinski et al., 2021).

Direct effects of team brand associations and team identification

The empirical findings confirmed a significant relationship among team brand associations, team identification, and social media engagement. Particularly, the findings revealed a significant positive relationship between benefits associations on both consumption and contribution, but not creation behaviors. Similarly, non-product related associations significantly predicted consumption, but not higher levels of social media engagement. The benefits and non-product related attributes also significantly influence team identification. These findings are consistent with previous studies related to team brand association (e.g., Gladden & Funk, 2002; Kunkel et al., 2016) and team identification literature (Kwon et al., 2022; Pradhan et al., 2020; Wann et al., 2017). Specifically, the benefits-based associations, such as diversion and socialization, support prior findings in sport marketing literature emphasizing intrinsic motivations and symbolic meanings (Bauer et al., 2008; Yoshida et al., 2014). This is because fans may experience pride and personal fulfillment through a social sport environment in the stadium. By being part of the game and participating in the team's ritual at the stadium, fans develop their identity as loyal supporters. Further, this finding is in line with team identification research, which proposes fan-team congruence through the sense of belonging with the team community (Lock & Heere, 2017).

Equally important is the contribution of non-product related associations to the fan's consumption behavior and team identification. The above explains the positive influence of the team's logo or stadium's tangible and/or intangible characteristics on the consumer-based consumption in social media (e.g., reading articles and stats related to the team) and the symbolic and emotional elements of fans. Teams with historic stadiums, fancy logos, and high-quality amenities during the game might build stronger relationships with their fans and could positively impact their actual behavior and loyalty through consumption (e.g., buying merchandise or social media involvement). As Kunkel et al. (2014)

argued, by building a fan base through team associations, we enhance loyalty and identification within the team. Previous studies have also emphasized the key role of developing non-product related team associations (Daniels et al., 2019; Kunkel et al., 2016). Following the above discussion, several strategic implications for sport marketers and communication providers are generated. First, social media strategies should prioritize enhancing benefits-based brand associations. Campaigns should highlight the sense of team belonging, emotional excitement from being part of the team, and team pride, which are likely to foster social media engagement. Further, social media managers should develop a free-social environment on web pages and social platforms for fans' posts and comments. Moreover, the relevance of non-product-related attributes, such as logo, team's information, and stadium, suggests that peripheral brand elements (e.g., logo aesthetics, behind-the-scenes access, team stories, and stadium developments) can significantly influence passive engagement. Therefore, social media branding consistency and relational messaging are vital for fostering consumption-based behavior. Additionally, brand managers should generate original content with emotional messages to develop the fan-team congruence. This strategy will positively impact fans' identification.

Unlike what has been noted in past research related to team brand association (Gladden & Funk, 2001, 2022; Kunkel et al., 2016), our results fail to support a positive relationship between product-related attributes and social media engagement. This finding was unexpected since it challenges earlier studies that identified dimensions, such as on-field success, performance, and star player, as critical determinants of fan behavior (Kunkel et al., 2016, 2019). One possible explanation for this divergence lies in the nature of the engagement behaviors assessed. As conceptualized by the COBRAs framework (Muntinga et al., 2011), creation and contribution behaviors may require a stronger emotional or symbolic attachment than product-related cues alone can generate. Fans may recognize and value the team's success or star athletes, but these characteristics do not necessarily stimulate deeper engagement behaviors, particularly those that are expressive or co-creative in nature (e.g., content creation). Furthermore, product-related attributes are typically transient and externally determined, making them less stable bases for sustained online interaction. Also, this divergence may reflect a shifting emphasis in the digital age, where emotional and symbolic connections play a greater role in guiding fans' online engagement. As digital environments enable fans to connect, share, and co-create experiences, their motivations appear increasingly rooted in identity expression rather than team performance (Muntinga et al., 2011; Pradhan et al., 2011). Another reason that might explain this evidence is the intangible nature of these dimensions. Fans have limited or no influence on players' participation, choice of a new coach, or team success in the field. In contrast, benefits and non-product-related associations tend to represent more enduring, identity-related perceptions that are more likely to foster habitual and expressive social media behaviors. This finding supports the argument that emotional and symbolic brand dimensions play a more central role in driving digital fan engagement than performance-based characteristics, especially within social media contexts that prioritize relational and participatory interactions (Dolan et al., 2016; Williams & Chinn, 2010).

Another striking finding was the significant prediction of consumption, contribution, and creation by team identification. This finding was not a surprise since team identification holds a critical role in shaping fan engagement on social media platforms (Pegoraro, 2010), providing sport organizations with valuable opportunities to foster loyalty and enhance brand interaction (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018). According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), individuals who identify with a group, such as a sports team, are motivated to maintain and express that identity in public settings. Social media serves as a modern arena for this identity expression, where highly identified fans actively follow, comment on, share, and react to team-related content (Pegoraro, 2010). Research has shown that fans with strong team identification demonstrate higher levels of emotional involvement, which in turn increases their likelihood of engaging with content, defending the team in online discussions, and participating in digital rituals such as live tweeting during games (Clavio & Walsh, 2014; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). These interactions not only reflect loyalty but also reinforce group cohesion and a sense of belonging within the fan community (Lock et al., 2014). Moreover, user-generated content from highly identified fans, such as memes, personal posts, and reactions, serves as organic promotion for the team on social media (Williams & Chinn, 2010). Therefore, sport managers should recognize the power of social media engagement by designing personalized content strategies that resonate emotionally, strengthen fan communities, and build long-term digital brand equity.

Team identification as a mediator

Team identification partially mediated the effects of benefits associations and non-product related attributes on consumption (i.e., viewing, following) and contribution (i.e., commenting), while fully mediating their influence on the creation (i.e., posting original content) dimension. These findings underscore the central role of team identification in translating brand perceptions into complex and high involvement online behaviors (Kwon et al., 2022; Wear et al., 2018). Importantly, this result extends the traditional understanding of team identification beyond its established predictive power for offline behaviors such as game attendance, merchandise purchases, and word of mouth communication (Kwon et al., 2022), positioning it as a key construct in the digital sport marketing landscape. By applying the COBRAs framework (Muntinga et al., 2011), this evidence demonstrates that team identification does not merely correlate with digital behavior but serves as a critical psychological mechanism that drives the depth and complexity of fan engagement. Based on this final result, sport marketers should invest in initiatives that build long-term psychological connections with fans through social media platforms. These might include loyalty online programs, fan inclusion in content creation, participatory campaigns, and storytelling that reinforces shared identity and values. One more strategy for sport marketers might be the creation of a tailored-made online based on fans' identification and engagement factors. For example, highly identified fans might be targeted with co-creative opportunities, while casual fans may respond better to short, entertaining consumption-based content. Lastly, sport organizations should view digital platforms not just as promotional tools but as a broad network where fans' self-concept and team membership are continuously reinforced.

These insights offer several theoretical contributions. First, the finding of team identification, which serves as a mediator, bridges brand perceptions with fan behaviors in a digital setting, aiming to foster deeper, meaningful fan interactions across social media platforms, far from the traditional outcomes. This evidence highlights the key role of team identification in spectatorship literature and its power in consumer behavior research. Second, it empirically differentiates the influence of brand association factors (benefits, product related, non-product related) on multiple forms of engagement, an approach that moves beyond the aggregate treatment common in prior research. By modeling team brand associations as formative constructs, this study also contributes methodologically, responding to calls for greater specificity in construct operationalization (Diamantopoulos & Siguaw, 2006). Third, this study refines the COBRAs framework (Muntinga et al., 2011) by illustrating how each level of engagement is differentially driven by psychological and brand-related antecedents. Notably, while consumption can be prompted by symbolic cues alone, creation appears to require stronger affective alignment with the team identification.

Beyond the statistical relationships observed, it is important to consider the broader contextual factors that may shape fan behaviors in digital spaces. In particular, culture shapes the way individuals express identity, and affiliation with social groups, including sport teams (Lock & Heere, 2017). For example, in collectivist cultures, such as Greece, where group belonging and emotional expression are emphasized, fans may be more likely to form deep psychological attachments to their teams and display these affiliations publicly; this may explain the strong mediating role of team identification observed in our study. In contrast, in more individualistic cultures, digital engagement may be less influenced by identification and more driven by entertainment or transactional motivations (Dolan et al., 2016). In addition, the nature of the competition (e.g., domestic league matches, regional rivalries) likely moderates both the intensity and form of fan engagement. For instance, fans may respond differently to their team's social media content depending on the perceived stakes of a match or the symbolic meaning of an opponent. These contextual variations suggest that while our findings are robust within the studied setting, caution is needed when generalizing across different countries or sports ecosystems.

Limitations and future research

Despite these contributions, the study is subject to several limitations. The first concerns geographic scope and generalizability. The sample consisted exclusively of Greek football fans, which may limit applicability across different cultural contexts, sporting disciplines, or league systems. Therefore, generalizability should be made with caution. Future cross-cultural studies are needed to confirm the generalizability of these findings. Second, the cross-sectional design limits causal inferences. Longitudinal studies could provide a clearer understanding of how brand associations and team identification evolve

over time and in response to external events (e.g., wins, scandals, or player trades). Moreover, the use of self-report measures introduces potential for social desirability and recall biases (e.g., fans may struggle to recall their actual social media presence). Future research could integrate behavioral data from social media platforms (e.g., actual shares, likes, posts) to triangulate self-reported engagement levels. Finally, data collection through a football-focused social media page might have introduced self-selection bias, as more engaged or digitally active fans were likely overrepresented, potentially restricting the generalizability of the results. To improve sample representation and minimize self-selection bias, subsequent studies could consider using random or stratified sampling techniques.

On the other hand, several suggestions emerge for future research. First, scholars should seek to replicate and extend this study across different sports (e.g., basketball, esports) and regions (e.g., North America, Asia), where cultural and contextual variables may influence both brand perceptions and team identification processes. Furthermore, research could explore negative brand associations (e.g., crisis, scandals) to determine whether and how team identification buffers fan disengagement. Understanding the dynamics of disengagement is critical in the age of online culture. Last, future studies might examine the role of content formats (e.g., video, story, meme) and platform characteristics (e.g., TikTok, Threads, Instagram) in mediating or moderating the relationship between brand associations and fan engagement.

Conclusion

This study extends prior literature by indicating that another antecedent of fans' engagement with their favorite sport teams concerns their perceptions of team brand associations, particularly those related to benefits and non-product attributes. Importantly, sport team identification acts as a central mediating variable, especially in fostering more active forms of engagement, such as content creation. Even though product related attributes did not show to be related to associations, the results outlined that strengthening the psychological bond between fans and teams is crucial for driving online engagement.

At the theoretical level, the present research contributes to the understanding of fans' social media engagement by identifying specific brand-related causes of the construct and highlighting the role of the psychological bond formed between an individual and their favorite sport team as a mechanism through which brand perceptions translate into specific positive digital behaviors toward their favorite team. The use of the COMBRAs framework allowed examining the roles played by team brand associations and team identification in driving varying levels of fans' social media engagement.

From a practical standpoint, the outcomes emphasize that managers should concentrate on cultivating benefits-focused and non-product related brand associations, such as emotional connections, symbolic team elements, and relational initiatives that can increase their fans' team identification levels and encourage passive and more active forms of social media engagement. Additionally, practitioners should recognize the pivotal role of sport team identification, not just as a consequence of branding efforts, but also as a means to foster more participatory online engagement. These insights can assist sport managers in more effectively engaging their fan base and, ultimately, building stronger digital communities.

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