

3-15-2022

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Recommended Citation

Yu, Ho Yeol; Ternes, Neal; Ambs, Claudia B.; and Kim, Sanghoon (2022) "Relationship Between a Reflective-Formative Model of Team Brand Associations and Behavioral Intentions: The Mediating Effect of Fan Identification," *Journal of Applied Sport Management*. Vol. 14 : Iss. 1.

<https://doi.org/10.7290/jasm141nP9>

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jasm/vol14/iss1/5>

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Relationship Between a Reflective-Formative Model of Team Brand Associations and Behavioral Intentions: The Mediating Effect of Fan Identification

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Abstract

Understanding fans' perceived associations with their favorite teams is crucial for the successful management of sport teams. In the current study, team brand associations are measured as a reflective-formative construct to examine the role of the fan identification on the relationship between team brand associations and behavioral intentions. Data from professional soccer spectators ($n = 101$) were analyzed using PLS-SEM. The results indicated that the reflective-formative construct of team brand associations and fan identification influence behavioral intention, whilst fan identification was found to mediate the relationship between team brand associations and behavioral intentions. Managerial implications include strategic marketing how sport team managers can alter their team brand associations to foster the relationship between fans and teams.

Keywords: *team brand associations, fan identification, reflective-formative model*

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Introduction

Psychological connections between team brands and fans remain a pivotal element of the sport industry – with positive perceptions of brands being linked to numerous examples of financial success within the sport industry (Kunkel et al., 2017; Mason, 1999; Ross, 2007). Particularly, a positive brand association is linked to consumer purchase intent – fueling consumption of goods including tickets and team merchandising (Gladden & Funk, 2002; Kunkel et al., 2017; Ross et al., 2006). The importance of creating and managing positive brand perceptions cannot be understated. In the United States, where the average sport franchise in the “big four” sporting leagues is currently valued at \$2.278 billion (Badenhausen, 2020), influencing consumer demand for sporting products (tickets, merchandise, etc.) is essential for revenue generation and growth (see Winfree et al., 2018). Proper management of brand association is thus essential for firms to achieve economic success.

Sport marketing researchers have paid particular attention to fans’ perceived associations with a team. Generally, individuals’ perceived associations are anything that exists in individual’s minds and favorable associations with a brand can increase sales, lower costs, and heighten company profits (Keller, 2008). Sport teams have unique facets, which trigger a set of individual psychological associations linked to the sport team in the fan’s memory (Gladden & Funk, 2001, 2002; Ross et al., 2006; Kunkel et al., 2017). The team brand associations developed by fans are often used to assess and understand fan perceptions which are likely to affect behavioral intentions, such as ticket and merchandise purchases (Gladden & Funk, 2002; Kunkel et al., 2017; Ross et al., 2006). Sport managers can differentiate their teams by enhancing and managing associations, which can allow sport marketers to utilize more effective brand management strategies (Alexandris et al., 2008; Bauer, Stokburger-Sauer, & Exler, 2008; Gladden & Funk, 2002).

Fan identification has also been used to conceptualize spectator relationships with teams. Stemming from social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1985), team identification utilizes the psychological benefit of organizational membership to the individual as a means for understanding the motivations of sport consumer behavior (Heere et al., 2011). For example, fans with strong connections to a specific team (or highly identified fans) are more likely to have a positive attitude toward a sport brand (Ross et al., 2009), which can impact fans’ consumption behaviors like choosing to watch a televised event (Kunkel et al., 2017) or attend a game in person (Lee et al., 2020). Importantly, however, fan identification is not necessarily synonymous with brand association, as team identification posits psychological connections between fans and sporting events that occur outside the mediated image of a team’s brand (Heere et al., 2011).

Many studies have shown fans’ identification level is one of the subdimensions in creating team brand association (see Biscaia et al., 2016; Gladden & Funk, 2001). However, other researchers have provided evidence of causal relationships between team brand associations and fan identification (see Ross et al., 2009; Wear & Heere, 2020). The use of different theories may explain these conflicting results. A clearer comprehension of how to maximize brand association in a highly competitive industry, such as sport organizations, warrants more thorough investigation of the concept. Given the importance of understanding brand association for sport teams looking to compete in an ever expanding market, it is necessary to fill this gap in the literature with research which can elaborate the mediating effect of team identification on team brand association. A better understanding of the interconnectivity between these constructs can provide insight into the factors behind fan behavioral intention, leading to more efficient and effective sport marketing strategies.

Accordingly, the aim of the study was to examine the mediating effect of fan identification on the relationship between sport team brand associations and behavioral intention.

Utilizing a survey of Major League Soccer fans, this research documents the interconnection between fan identification and team brand associations in order to provide a better understanding of how brand management for teams may more effectively utilize these concepts in their marketing strategies.

Conceptual Framework and Hypothesis Development

Fans' perceived associations with their favorite team is a central constituent of brand equity (team brand associations), which is often used to examine how brands generate value (Bauer et al., 2008). Though researchers have used various models (e.g., Gladden & Funk, 2001, 2002; Ross et al., 2006; Ross et al., 2008), the extant literature on sport brand associations favors a direct relationship with fans' behavioral intentions (Biscaia et al., 2016).

One of the main differences between models is the inclusion or exclusion of fan identification as an element of association. For professional sport teams and major leagues, recognition and recall are already established among people of the general public, and recognition among fans is typically higher (Bauer et al., 2008). Accordingly, some studies have excluded the measure of a level of fan identification from their investigation of team brand associations.

Others have used fan identification to a team brand association model (Biscaia et al., 2013; Ross et al., 2008). Wear and Heere (2020) and Ross et al. (2009) have explored the direct relationship between team brand associations and fan identification. In addition, previous studies in the general management literature found individuals' identification with organizations can play a mediating role (e.g., Olkkonen & Lipponen, 2006). Besides, a relationship between sport consumers' perceived associations/image and fans' level of identification was studied (Lee et al., 2020).

Overall, it is conceivable that fan identification may play a mediating role in the relationship between team brand associations and behavioral intentions given the similarities in focus and intent between the two models. Additionally, since the mediation effect of fan identification on the relationship between motivational perceptions and behavioral intentions has been documented in the literature (Kwon et al., 2008), the mediation effect of fan identification on team brand is an important gap in the literature to be filled.

In sum, a review of the current sport management literature on team brand associations indicates that team brand associations (e.g., team's logo, star player, social interaction, etc.) will affect fan identification and behavioral intentions. Furthermore, we expect fan identification will play a mediating role in the relationship between team brand associations and behavioral intentions. Hence, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1: Team brand associations will be significantly related with fan identification.

H2: Team brand associations will be significantly related with behavioral intention.

H3. Fan identification will be significantly related with behavioral intention.

H4. Fan identification will mediate the relationship between team brand associations and behavioral intentions.

Method

Participants

Using a convenience sampling technique, this exploratory research collected data from Major League Soccer spectators located in the Mideast region of the United States. Trained research assistants were located in the two main entrances at game days, and they distributed the questionnaires and explained the purpose of study. Participants were given the consent form and informed their responses were anonymous and voluntary. A total of 101 usable responses were deemed usable. The average age of the respondents ranged between 18-60 years old ($M = 29.2$, $SD = 9.4$) and the majority of respondents were male (65.3%) and identified as either Caucasian (44.6%) or Hispanic (45.5%).

Instruments

To measure sport team brand associations, items were derived from the existing model (i.e., Team Brand Association Scale; Ross et al., 2006). Some items were added due to the low reliability and validity from the original model. A type of commitment was removed since it is conceptually identical with fan identification construct. As a result, a higher order of team brand associations consisted of brand mark, rivalry, concessions, social interaction, organizational attributes, stadium community, team history, team success, team play, and non-player personnel. All items were anchored by a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *Never*, 7 = *Always*). A three-item of fan identification was adapted from Robinson and Trail (2005). Behavioral intention was measured in general context using 3 items based on intentions of attendance, merchandized, and televised. The fan identification and behavioral intention items were anchored by a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *None*, 7 = *Very much*).

Data Analysis

In this study, partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed to evaluate the measurement and structural model using SmartPLS. PLS-SEM is variance-based SEM, which differs from other covariance-based SEM. PLS-SEM, the high statistical analysis power, can test the research model with a small sample size and non-normal distribution data (Hair et al., 2017). Particularly, PLS-SEM is appropriate in this study since PLS-SEM can handle a reflective-formative measurement. Repeated indicator approach was followed to estimate the higher-order construct (Wold, 1982). This study used a 5000-bootstrapping procedure.

Regarding the model, a reflective-formative approach of team brand associations was employed in this study in which the lower-order constructs are reflectively measured by their multiple items. Team brand associations are a higher-order construct that is measured formatively by its lower-order constructs. A similar procedure was employed in the sport management research by arguing that types of team brand associations are conceptually distinct (see Kunkel et al., 2017).

Results

Assessment of Lower-Order Measurement

Lower-order constructs were examined (see Table 1). To test internal consistency of the measurement, composite reliabilities was used, and all the values were in the range of .76-.94, which were greater than the cut-off point of 0.70. Thus, internal reliability was ensured. For the convergent validity of the measurement, values of average variance extracted (AVE) and factor loadings were examined, which should be above .50 and .40, respectively (Ghasemy et al., 2020; Field, 2009). Since two items' factor loadings were below the suggested threshold, the items were deleted. Measurement was then re-analyzed. The results showed that all the values of AVE and factor loadings were above the minimum acceptable value. Therefore, convergent validity was ensured. The constructs' discriminant validity was assessed utilizing Fornell and Larcker's (1981) criterion. The square root of AVE values was greater than correlation coefficients between all constructs, thus indicating that discriminant validity was accepted (see Table 2).

Table 1
Factor loading (λ), Composite reliability (C.R.), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE).

Constructs	Items	λ	C.R.	AVE
Brand Mark	1. The symbol of the team	.871	.86	.68
	2. The team's logo	.811		
	3. The team colors	.805		
Rivalry	1. Beating the team's main rival	.766	.76	.52
	2. The team's biggest opponent	.724		
	3. The team's conference	.678		
Concessions	1. Eating a specific food at the stadium/arena	.869	.92	.75
	2. Eating at the stadium/arena	.836		
	3. Concessions at the stadium/arena	.835		
	4. Consuming beverages at the stadium/arena	.672		
Social Interaction	1. Other fans of the team	.808	.84	.64
	2. Going to games with my friends	.802		
	3. Enjoy being with others at the game	.795		
Team History	1. Game winning plays in the team's history	.793	.80	.50
	2. Championships the team has won	.722		
	3. The most recent championship the team won	.679		
	4. The success of the team in the past	.629		
Organizational Attributes	1. An organization committed to its fans	.798	.81	.58
	2. A team loyal to its fans	.766		
	3. The team giving back to the community	.736		
Non-player personnel	1. The head coach	.866	.87	.63
	2. A current coach on the team	.841		
	3. Excellent coaches	.822		
	4. Owners of the team	.636		
Stadium Community	1. The area surrounding the stadium/arena	.815	.89	.56
	2. The community surrounding the stadium/arena	.810		
	3. The location of the stadium/arena	.796		
	4. The city that the team is from	.794		
	5. What stadium/arena the team plays its home games in	.749		
	6. The team's home stadium/arena	.694		
	7. Unique characteristics of the team's stadium/arena	.561		
Team Success	1. A winning team	.912	.92	.71
	2. The performance of the team	.894		
	3. Quality players	.830		
	4. The quality of the team	.803		
	5. A great team	.791		
Team Play	1. How the team scores its points	.845	.87	.64
	2. Specific team characteristics (e.g., lucky, exciting)	.833		
	3. Enjoy the playing style of the team	.791		
	4. Important to see team play rather than individual plays	.733		

Table 1 Continued

Constructs	Items	λ	C.R.	AVE
Behavioral Intention	1. How likely are you going to watch team sports on TELEVISION	.833	.80	.58
	2. How likely are you going to spend on TEAM MERCHANDISE	.823		
	3. How likely are you going to ATTEND at team sporting event	.630		
Fan Identification	1. I consider myself to be a “real” fan of my favorite sporting team	.882	.85	.65
	2. I would experience a loss if I had to stop being a fan of my favorite sporting team	.828		
	3. I would experience a loss if I had to stop being a fan of my favorite sporting team	.713		

Table 2

Assessment of discriminant validity using the Fornell–Larcker criterion.

Construct	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. BM	0.83											
2. RI	0.47	0.72										
3. CON	0.16	0.28	0.81									
4. SI	0.36	0.56	0.33	0.80								
5. OA	0.42	0.60	0.11	0.52	0.77							
6. SC	0.30	0.48	0.44	0.40	0.47	0.75						
7. TH	0.32	0.50	0.13	0.34	0.59	0.28	0.71					
8. TS	0.35	0.63	0.18	0.41	0.60	0.54	0.54	0.85				
9. TP	0.32	0.60	0.22	0.42	0.59	0.48	0.55	0.73	0.80			
10. NP	0.31	0.47	0.28	0.17	0.47	0.48	0.45	0.51	0.50	0.80		
11. FID	0.21	0.44	-0.09	0.25	0.48	0.22	0.43	0.38	0.46	0.37	0.81	
12. BI	0.31	0.41	0.01	0.29	0.45	0.23	0.36	0.37	0.47	0.29	0.71	0.77

Note. Values on the diagonal are squared root AVE values, and those outside the diagonal are the correlations.

Assessment of Reflective-Formative Measurement

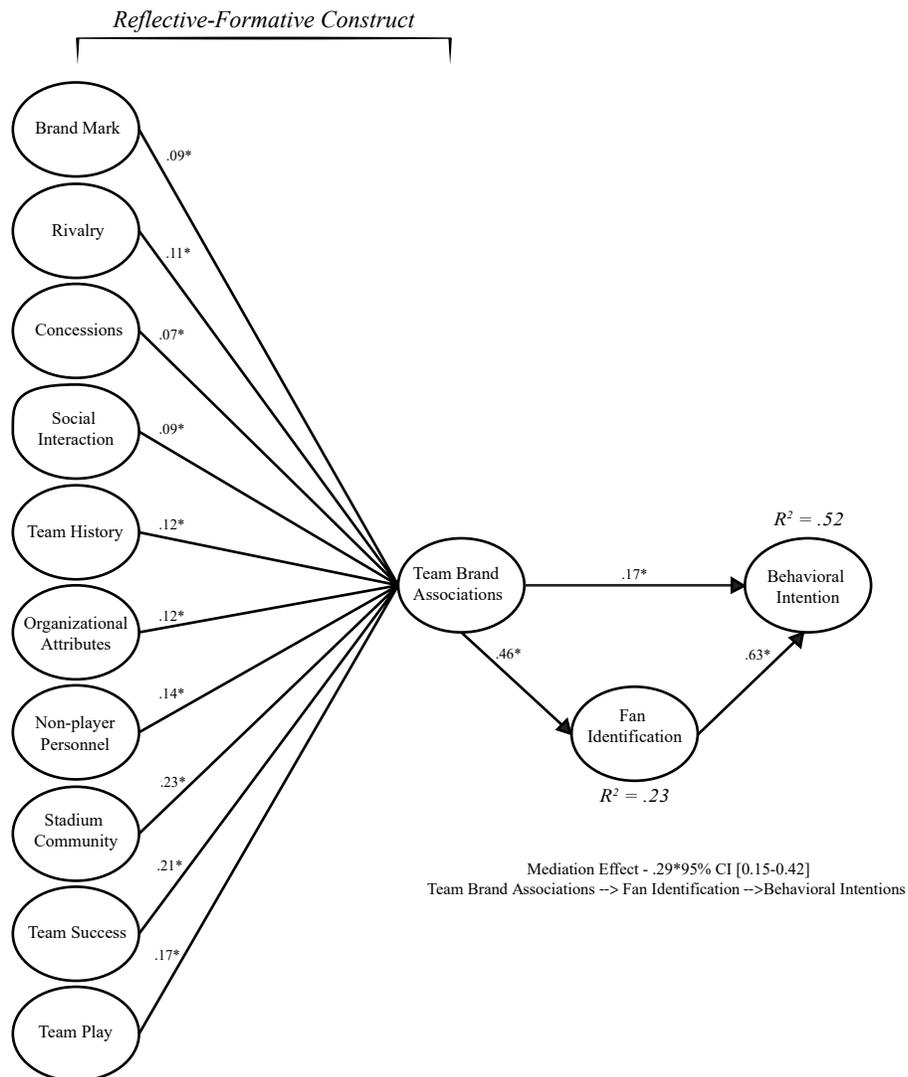
Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) is utilized to assess collinearity issue among the constructs, which should be less than 3 (Ghasemy et al., 2020). The assessment of the VIF values were less than 3, thereby indicating the absence of collinearity issues. Significance and relevance of formative items were assessed with the 5,000 resample of bootstrapping procedure. Outer weights of types of team brand associations on higher-order of team brand associations were examined. The results showed that all team brand association types were significant and had higher outer loadings than the suggested value .50 (Hair et al., 2017). Because the results of the reflective and formative measurement model showed acceptable levels of reliability and validity, the structural model was carried out.

Hypotheses Tests

PLS-SEM based on the relationships among the reflective-formative model of team brand associations, fan identification, and behavioral intention was performed to investigate the proposed hypotheses (see Figure 1). As a result, team brand associations had a significant impact on fan identification ($\beta = 0.46, p < .05, 95\% \text{ CI} = [0.25-0.64]$) and behavioral intention ($\beta = 0.17, p < .05, 95\% \text{ CI} = [0.01-0.35]$), thus supporting H1 and H2. In addition, a positive and significant relationship was identified between fan identification

and behavioral intention ($\beta = 0.63, p < .05, 95\% \text{ CI} = [0.45-0.746]$), indicating that H3 was supported. Lastly, fan identification mediated the relationship between team brand associations and behavioral intention ($\beta = 0.29, p < .05$), and $95\% \text{ CI} [0.15-0.42]$ did not include zero. Thus, H4 was supported. Since all relationships were positively related, a partial mediation effect was recognized. The model accounted for 52% of the variance in behavioral intention and 23% of the variance in fan identification. Additionally, cross-validated redundancy was performed to understand the predictive relevance of the model (Q^2 ; Hair et al., 2017). Q^2 values of 0.35, 0.02, and 0.15 indicate large, small, and medium relevance, respectively. The results exhibited the Q^2 value for team brand association and fan identification were .27 and .11, respectively.

Figure 1
The results of PLS-SEM with a reflective-formative model.



Discussions and Implications

Recognizing the scarcity of research on the mediation effect of fan identification on sport brand literature, this study explored the mediating effect of fan identification on the relationship between team brand associations and behavioral intentions. It was observed that team brand associations influence behavioral intentions positively through the fans' level of identification. This means that increasing fans' perceived associations results in enhancing fans' level of identification, which, in turn, leads to higher profits from team-related consumption. The results are consistent with previous research that identified perceived associations as significant predictors of fan identification (Fink et al., 2002; Lee et al., 2020; Wear & Heere, 2020) and behavioral intentions (Biscaia et al., 2013; Kunkel et al., 2017; Ross et al., 2008).

The positive relationship between team brand associations and fan identification adds to the empirical evidence's proposition that sport fans' psychological memories of associations with sport teams influence their level of fan identification (Wear & Heere, 2020). In addition, fan identification has been identified as a significant predictor of behavioral intention, including viewing events on televised, game attendance, and purchasing merchandise. This relationship has been identified in the sport management literature (Kwon et al., 2008). The current study reaffirmed its existence.

In terms of the reflective-formative model of team brand associations, it is important to note that all team brand association types were linked to their favorite team, in line with the extant literature (e.g., Biscaia et al., 2013; Ross et al., 2008). While these associations existed in the minds of fans, the findings of current research indicate that three types of associations influence fans' perceptions of the team brand significantly: stadium atmosphere, team's quality, and team's playing style. Specifically, these types of associations had a significant positive influence on fans' perceptions of the team brand, which in turn explained fans' level of identification and future behavior intentions (e.g., live attendance and consumption of merchandise).

The results of this study have implications for sport marketing practitioners in MLS. Notably, the evidence derived from this study can be used to develop a marketing strategy aimed at strengthening or increasing a positive attitude and behavior toward their team. For example, this study highlights the importance of connecting to fans via social media to increase positive perceptions by sharing winning results and team highlights. While several MLS teams engage in these practices, our research indicates that these efforts are an important strategy for teams who have been more reticent to rely heavily on social media platforms to generate positive team brand associations. Particularly, blended social media environments (such as those utilized by teams like the Seattle Sounders and Sporting KC), have the potential to provide additional touchpoints for fans to develop positive memories and experiences with teams that can positively influence future purchase behavior. Furthermore, given soccer's less popular status in the United States, social media engagement could be particularly useful in helping to educate fans so that they better appreciate team playing style, which we found to be one of the three factors that significantly impacted team brand associations. Finally, integrated marketing strategies which link fans to the stadium and its surrounding environment should be essential to MLS teams looking to improve fan perceptions of their brand. Future research on this topic seems necessary as the degree to which fans – particularly casual MLS fans – associate community and city with the teams in the league would help determine how much work is needed in this area.

As with any other research, there are two limitations in this study which should be addressed. Since this study collected data from one place using a convenience sampling technique, the generalizability of these findings is limited. Thus, future research should collect more diverse sport fans and locations. Additionally, even though TBAS has been used by many sport marketing

researchers, some salient factors such as star player and level of competition are not included in this scale compared to other scales (Team Association Scale; Gladden & Funk, 2002). In this sense, it is important to consider to modify the TBAS scale to capture other salient association factors.

In conclusion, understanding team brand associations is crucial for strengthening the relationship between fans and teams as well as for predicting fans' behavioral intentions. The current study emphasizes the necessity for sport managers to create favorable team brand associations to attract their fans. Furthermore, sport managers should understand the importance of perceived team brand associations because they reveal characteristics of the team that can be influenced through marketing and management (Bauer et al., 2008).

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