SPORTS BRAND LOYALTY: IT IS ALL ABOUT LOVE

ABSTRACT

Loureiro, Ruediger, and Demetris (2012) explains that to love a brand, consumers need to be attached to it, that is to feel that the brand is irreplaceable and would miss it when they do not have the brand. The objective of this study will be to measure how sports fans' affection to their respective team can influence their loyalty to a particular brand. It will also focus on identifying strong relationships that can make an individual loyal to the brand and explore how management strategies could help to develop brand love on sports fans. This study includes 413 sports consumers. To analyze the collected that and to be able to develop a conclusion based on data the Partial Least Square- Structural Equation Model (PLS-SEM). The significant implication of this study is that family-related feelings towards the team will develop Brand love as an emotional attachment indicator towards their teams, and emotionally attached fans will build brand loyalty to consume their products.

INTRODUCTION

Kim, Trail, Woo, and Zhang (2011) propose that sports organizations recognize the importance and potential benefits of a strong marketing relationship. They are emphasizing on building a good relationship with its fans that will result in an increase on purchase intentions (Kim et al., 2011). The importance of acquiring long-term customers drives this increased interest in a marketing relationship. Kim et al. (2011) stated that strong long-term relationships with customers are known to generate favorable outcomes such as increased profitability, cost reduction, increased sales and a positive word of mouth (Bühler & Nuffer, 2010; Stokburger-Sauer, 2010; Palmatier, Jarvis, Bechkoff & Kardes, 2009; Sirdeshmukh, Singh & Sabol, 2002). Also, devoted fans attend games regularly, buy more of the team's licensed merchandise than other fans, seek team-related information through media and engage actively in a positive word-of-mouth communication (Kim et al., 2011).

Cunningham and Kwon, (2003) mentioned in their study that there has been an increasing amount of research related to understanding consumers' attendance behaviors. Brand love is influenced by a hedonic product and self-expressive brand and has a positive effect on brand

loyalty and positive word-of-mouth (Thomson et al., 2005). Loureiro, Ruediger, and Demetris (2012) explains that to love a brand, consumers need to be attached to it, that is to feel that the brand is irreplaceable and would miss it when they do not have the brand. Accordingly, researchers around the world have begun to recognize the importance of these behaviors, increasing the number of studies related to this topic (Nakazawa, Mahony, Funk & Hirakawa, 1999; Trail, Anderson, & Fink, 2002; Trail and James, 2001; Wakefield & Sloan, 1995; Wann, 1995; Zhang, Pease, Hui, & Michaud, 1995; Zhang, Pease, & Smith, 1998; Zhang, Pease, Smith, Lee, Lam, & Jambor, 1997). Cunningham and Kwon (2003) proposed that much of the studies in the field lack of a theoretical framework guide the research questions or hypotheses (Funk, Haugtvedt, & Howard, 2000; Kahle, Kambara, & Rose, 1996; Mahony & Moorman, 1999; Melnick, 1993). To manage the theoretical deficiencies in explaining sports consumers' game attendance behavior, Cunningham and Kwon (2003) carried out their study, based on Ajzen's (1985, 1991) Theory of Planned Behavior. The Theory of Planned Behavior is currently used in a variety of research fields, like green product consumption (Paul, Modi, & Patel,2016), physiology (De Vivo, Hulbert, Mills, & Uphill, 2016), marketing (Kalafatis, Pollard, East, & Tsogas, 1999) and sports management (Cunningham and Kwon, 2003). The conceptual model of this study was be based on the integration of theories like Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen's, 1985, 1991) Social Identity Theory and Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1979).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of this study will be based on Azjen (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior because it is designed to predict and explain human behavior in specific contexts where cognitive self-regulation plays an important role. Also, Azjen explains that according to the Theory of Planned Behavior, perceived behavioral control, together with behavioral intention, can be used directly to predict behavioral achievement. Counting on projected conducts from individuals, could confirm their inclinations and investigate why they act like they do under certain circumstances.

Bellow we present a literature review that was used to develop a conceptual framework based on the following construct and variables:

Table 1.

Variable	Literature review
Social identity	Carlson and Donavan (2013) presented social identity based on the Social Identity Theory that individuals make sense of the world by categorizing themselves and others into groups, and self-categorization into a group serves a self-definitional role (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). Consumers are drawn to teams that have a substantial similarity to their own actual or ideal self (Carlson et al., 2009; Fink et al., 2009; Madrigal, 2008).
Cultural identification	Drengner et al. (2012) referenced that research within-group behavior suggests that "when self-categorization as a group member is significant, a person is influenced by group norms, behaves in line with those norms, and shares the concerns and interests of the group" (Abrams & Hogg, 2004).
Nationality	A study by Jones (1997) founded that the two main reasons for supporting their favorite football club were that it was the local team and that the supporter was born in that specific town. Also, Abosag et al. (2012) mention that many individuals staggered thinking their club is being reduced to no more than a brand.
Family	Thakor and Lavack (2003) mentioned that an individual becomes a sports fan through the desire to spend more time with his or her family (Gantz,1981; Gantz &Wenner,1995; Raney,2006; Wann,1995,1997; Wenner & Gantz,1989). Loureiro et al. (2012) explain how family history often dictates that the support for a club be "handed down" from generation to generation.
Digital marketing exposure	Chi (2011) exposes how the growing popularity of social media has lead advertisers to spend more effort into communicating with consumers through online social networking (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe 2007).
Brand Love	Ahuvia (1993) suggested that consumers can have real feelings of love toward an object and conceptualizes the love as having two dimensions: real and desired integration. Thomson et al., (2005) proposed that brand love is influenced by a hedonic product and self-expressive brand and has a positive effect on brand loyalty and positive word-of-mouth (Thomson et al., 2005).

Variable	Literature review
	Consumers satisfied and in love with a brand are more willing to repurchase and to recommend it to others (Loureiro et al., 2012). Vernuccio, Pagani, Barbarossa, and Pastore (2015) presented that in the nascent literature, brand love models predict brand acceptance, brand loyalty, and engagement in positive word-of-mouth (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Batra et al., 2012; Wallace et al., 2014).
Brand Loyalty	Alizadeh and Janani (2015) cited that brand loyalty, in the degree of consumer's emotional attachment to the desired brand, considers 6 dimensions for it: consumer willingness to repurchase, cost benefits, satisfaction rates, transportation costs, preferring other brands, and the commitment to the brand. Assael (1987) defined brand loyalty as the commitment to a particular brand with commitment being defined as an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship' (Moorman et al., 1992, p.316, Loureiro et al., 2012). Sports can be consumed in these following ways: merchandise, live events, TV watching, social media and streaming (Euromonitor, 2016).
Event Attendance	Based on Collignon, and Sulta (2014) recently attendances at live games remain high because major sports events are selling out.
Purchase of License Products	Emotional attachment is an essential driver of game attendance and licensed apparel purchases (Taute, Sierra & Heiser, 2010).
Watch Game on Television	Collignon and Sultan (2014) presented that live events remain vastly popular, with ticket prices skyrocketing, while competition for valuable television rights is intense. Among high-income nations, television broadcasting is an essential source of revenues in all the key professional sports (Noll, 2007).
Social Media Interaction	Lim, Hwang, Kim, and Biocca (2015) referenced that in recent years, several researchers examined the mechanism in which consumers' virtual experiences led to brand loyalty (Cheng, Chieng, & Chieng, 2014; Laroche, Habibi, Richard, & Sankaranarayanan, 2012).

Based in the literature presented above, the following hypothesis were developed for this study (this hypothesis are illustrates in figure 1):

H1 – Individuals that socially identify themselves with the team will develop brand love to their respective teams.

H2 – Individuals that feel cultural identification with their team will develop brand love to their respective team.
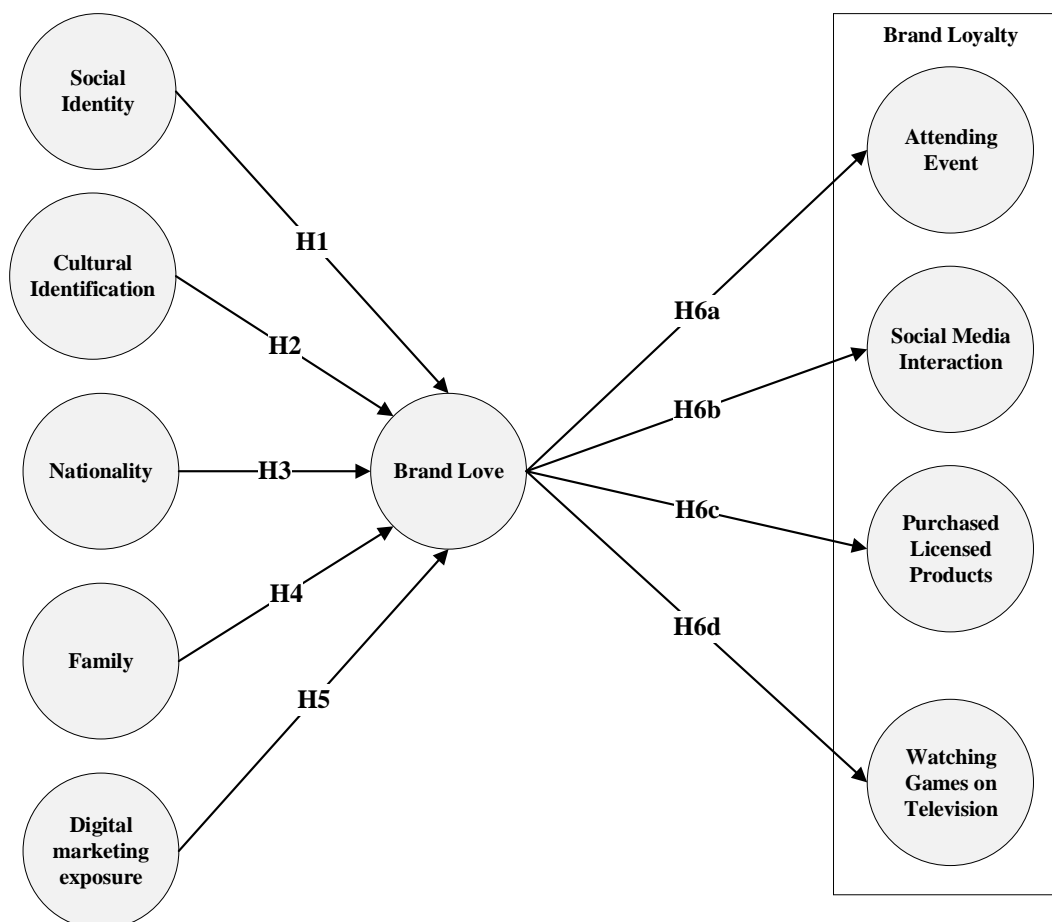
H3 – The nationality of the brand will affect the individual development of brand love.

H4 – The family influence fans will develop a brand love to their teams.

H5 - Digital-marketing exposed fans will love their team.

H6 – Fans who love their team will commit to the brand, regardless of the conditions or scenarios presented.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model

OBJECTIVES

The objective of this study will be to measure how sports consumers affection to their respective team can influence their loyalty to a particular brand. It will also focus on identifying strong relationships that can make an individual loyal to the brand and explore how management strategies could help to develop an emotional attachment to brand on sports fans. In accordance, the purpose of this study will be to develop proposed a marketing and management model that will suggest an increase of brand attachment towards sports organizations.

METHODOLOGY

This study includes 413 sports consumers (male or female) with eighteen years of age or older. Sports consumers are individuals that have interest in any sports-related activity or have interacted with a sports event in any way in the past. The data collection was conducted during the baseball, volleyball and basketball seasons and events. Local as well as international events were selected to be able to see if consumer behavior will vary based on the type of event.

The international events selected for the data collection were the 2015-2016 Major League Baseball (MLB) regular season games, the 2016 Women's Volleyball Olympics Qualifier and the 2016-2017 National Basketball Association (NBA) regular season and playoffs games. The local events selected were the 2017 Superior National Basketball League(Baloncesto *Superior Nacional*, BSN by its Spanish acronym) regular season and playoffs games, the 2016 Superior Doble A Baseball League (*Beisbol Superior Doble A by its Spanish acronym*) regular season and playoffs games, and Casa Cuba Basketball Club. According to Aiken, Campbell, and Koch (2013) a survey is considered to be more administratively practical and efficient for collecting data, given the geographic dispersion of the population. The data was collected through a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed based on the variables discussed in the conceptual framework. The questions were grouped by second level constructs. Inside each group, five questions (related to the variables) were used to operationalize the construct. The questions were measured in a 5 point Likert Scale where five (5) completely agrees and one (1) completely disagree, except for brand loyalty that was measured with a 5 point Likert scale, where five (5)

was Every time and one (1) Never. The questionnaire was administrated on site at the Women's Volleyball Olympic Qualifier, Casa Cuba Basketball Club and using a snowball method using social media (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) and emails.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All analyses were performed by using Smart PLS, a Partial Least Squares (PLS) Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) tool. The first analysis performed was related to finding the convergent validity of the model. All the constructs of the model reflect an Average Variance Extracted (AVE) higher than .50, which is the minimum accepted based on Hair, Hult, Ringle, and Sarstedt (2016). This shows that the constructs within the model explain more than the 50% of the variance of the indicators. A Fornell-Larcker criterion assessment was also performed resulting in a squared root of AVE higher than the correlations for all reflective constructs compared with other latent variables in the path model, which indicates that all constructs are valid measures of unique concepts (Hair et al., 2016). Composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha were used to determine the reliability of the model. All the constructs exceeded the .70 minimum Cronbach's alpha acceptance score (Hair et al., 2016). The composite reliability test was performed to contrast the Cronbach's alpha (composite reliability does not assume equal indicator loading as Cronbach's alpha does), where all the values were considered acceptable because they resulted above .70. The variance inflation factor (VIF) was estimated to check for potential issues with multicollinearity and all the value where accepted (higher than 1(Hair et al., 2016).

The R^2 explains the variance of the endogenous latent variables in the structural model (Hair et al., 2017). According to Won (2013), a typical marketing research study accepts R^2 values of at least 0.25. This was also supported by Hair, Sarsted, Hopkins and Kuppelwieser (2014) who stated that because R^2 is embraced by a variety of disciplines, scholars must rely on a "rough" rule of thumb regarding an acceptable R^2 with 0.75, 0.50, 0.25, respectively (Hair, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2011; Helm, Eggert,& Garnefeld, 2009. In this model, the results show that cultural identification, digital marketing exposure, family, and nationality explain brand love with a value of 0.354. Also, it is shown that brand love explains loyalty to purchase license products in 0.327, loyalty on event

attendance in 0.314, loyalty to social media interaction in 0.357 and loyalty to watch the games in television in 0.278.).

Hypothesis testing and discussion

H1: Individuals that socially identify themselves with the team will develop brand love to their respective teams. To test the statistical significance of the results, the PLS-SEM with bootstrapping technique was run, and the result of the t value was 3.387. The critical value for t-statistics with a confidence level of 90% are 2.33 (1%), 1.65 (5%) and 1.28 (10%) (Hair et al., 2016). Because the t value is higher than the critical value recommended by Hair et al., (2016) (3.387 > 1.28), it can be stated that there is statistical significance to accept the hypothesis proposed by the author. As a result, it can be concluded that social Identity will develop brand love towards the brand. The results can be validated in figure 1.

There were statistically significant results found to accept the hypothesis. These results matched with statements proposed in other studies (Carlson & Donavan, 2013; Jung & Kim, 2015; Carlson & Donavan ,2013; Carlson et al., 2009; Fink, Trail & Anderson, 2002; Madrigal & Chen, 2008; Jung & Kim,2015). This means that social identity will develop brand love on sports consumers. It can be stated that marketers should use advertising campaigns that focus on creating the feeling of social identity with the team. These campaigns should make the consumer feel that they are part of the team.
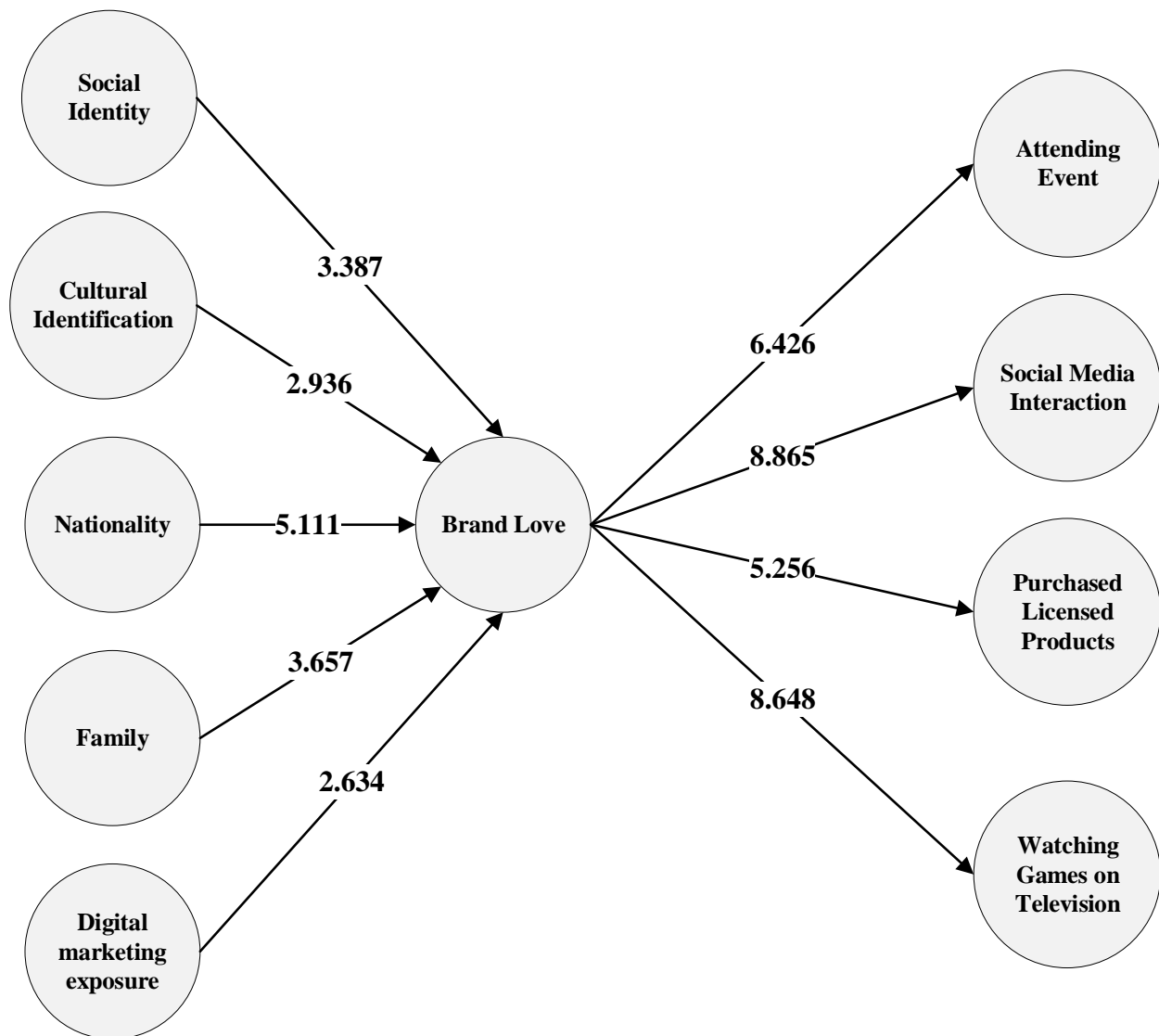
H2 – Individuals that feel cultural identification with their team will develop brand love to their respective team. To test the statistical significance of the results, the PLS-SEM with bootstrapping technique was run and the result of the t value was 2.936. The t value is higher than the critical value recommended by Hair et al., (2016) (2.936 > 1.28), it can be stated that there is statistical significance to accept the hypothesis proposed by the author. As a result, it can be concluded that culture will develop brand love towards the brand. The results can be validated in figure 2.

There was a statistically significant result found to accept the proposed hypothesis. These results coincided with what was proposed in other studies (Aaker et al., 2001; Drengner et al. ,2012). This means that culture is an antecedent to develop brand love. It can be concluded that

cultural focus marketing campaigns will contribute to developing brand love. Marketers should expand their broadcasting, website utilization of languages and promote the heritage from different cultures to increase the market reach to other additional cultures.

Figure 2. PLS-SEM with bootstrapping Results for the Conceptual Model.

Note: The results illustrate de t value that was obtained on the PLS-SEM with bootstrapping.

H3 – The nationality of the brand will affect the individual development of brand love. To test the statistical significance of the results, the PLS-SEM with bootstrapping technique was run, and the result of the t value was 5.111. The t value is higher than the critical value recommended by Hair et al., (2016) (5.111 > 1.28), it can be stated that there is statistical significance to accept the hypothesis proposed by the author. As a result, it can be concluded that nationality will develop brand love towards the brand. The results can be validated in figure 2.

There was a statistically significant result found to accept the proposed hypothesis (using the t-value). However, when analyzing the symbol in the path coefficient, these results were rejected with what was proposed in other studies (Abosag et al., 2012; Westerbeek & Smith, 2003; Thakor & Lavack, 2003; Kapferer, 2002; Jones, 1997). An important issue with the results is that the path coefficients for nationality were negative. This means that nationality will cause a negative but significant effect on brand love. This result was a consequence of the majority of the participants selecting an international team. The results suggested that a new study can be performed, but establishing that the participants will have to select a team that has a player, symbol or is located in their birth country.

H4 – The family influence fans will develop a brand love for their teams. To test the statistical significance of the results, the PLS-SEM with bootstrapping technique was run, and the result of the t value was 3.657. The t value is higher than the critical value recommended by Hair et al., (2016) (3.657 > 1.28), it can be stated that there is statistical significance to accept the hypothesis proposed by the author. As a result, it can be concluded that family will develop brand love towards the brand. The results can be validated in figure 2.

There was a statistically significant result found to accept the hypothesis. This result agreed with what was stated in other studies (Loureiro et al., 2012; Kang et al., 2012; Thakor & Lavack, 2003; Kapferer, 2001; Hunt et al.,1999). This means that family will develop brand love. It can be stated that if managers offer a family event through family marketing strategies, consumers will develop love that can be stimulated from generations to generations. Also, bringing the entire family to an event will increase ticket revenues, food, beverage, and memorabilia selling.

H5 - Digital-marketing exposed fans will love their team. To test the statistical significance of the results, the PLS-SEM with bootstrapping technique was run, and the result of the t value was 2.634. The t value is higher than the critical value recommended by Hair et al., (2016) (2.634 > 1.28), it can be stated that there is statistical significance to accept the hypothesis proposed by the author. As a result, it can be concluded that digital Advertisement Exposure will develop brand love towards the brand. The results can be validated in figure 2.

There was a statistically significant result found to accept the proposed hypothesis. These results concurred with what was proposed in other studies (Euromonitor, 2016; Williams & Chin, 2010; Fishers, 2008; Chi, 2011). This means that sports consumers will develop brand love when employing digital advertisement exposure. Managers should expose their teams to the market through digital publicizing strategies. They should try to increase their market share by inserting the team in social media platforms, web sites and digital commercials. The results can be validated in figure 1

H6 – Fans who love their team will commit to the brand, regardless of the conditions or scenarios presented.

H6a: Individuals that love the brand will be loyal to the brand by **attending the event.** To test the statistical significance of the results, the PLS-SEM with bootstrapping technique was run, and the result of the t value was 6.426. The value is higher than the critical value recommended by Hair et al., (2016) (6.426 > 1.28), it can be stated that there is statistical significance to accept the hypothesis proposed by the author. As a result, it can be concluded that individuals that love the brand will be loyal to the brand by attending the event. The results can be validated in figure 2.

*H6b: Individuals that love the brand will be loyal to the brand by **interacting with social media.*** To test the statistical significance of the results, the PLS-SEM with bootstrapping technique was run, and the result of the t value was 8.865. The t value is higher than the critical value recommended by Hair et al., (2016) (8.865 > 1.28), it can be stated that there is statistical significance to accept the hypothesis proposed by the author. As a result, it can be concluded that

individuals that love the brand will be loyal to the brand by interacting with social media. The results can be validated in figure 2.

*H6c: Individuals that love the brand will be loyal to the brand by **purchasing licensed products***. To test the statistical significance of the results, the PLS-SEM with bootstrapping technique was run, and the result of the t value was 5.256. The t value is higher than the critical value recommended by Hair et al., (2016) (5.256 > 1.28), it can be stated that there is statistical significance to accept the hypothesis proposed by the author. As a result, it can be concluded that individuals that love the brand will be loyal to the brand by purchasing licensed products. The results can be validated in figure 2.

*H6d: Individuals that love the brand will be loyal to the brand by watching the games **on television***. To test the statistical significance of the results, the PLS-SEM with bootstrapping technique was run, and the result of the t value was 8.648. The t value is higher than the critical value recommended by Hair et al., (2016) (8.648 > 1.28), it can be stated that there is statistical significance to accept the hypothesis proposed by the author. As a result, it can be concluded that individuals that love the brand will be loyal to the brand by watching the games on television. The results can be validated in figure 2.

There was a statistically significant result found to accept the four-proposed hypothesis (H6a,b,c,d). This result coincided with what was proposed in other studies for brand love with event attendance, social media interaction, purchase of licensed products and watching games in televisions (Vernuccio et al., 2015; Wallace et al., 2014; Batra et al., 2012; Loureiro et al., 2012; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Thomson et al., 2005; Ahuvia, 1993; Bowlby ,1979). This means that individuals that feel in love with the team are more likely to be loyal to the brand by repeating the four type of consumptions presented. Managers should focus on the antecedents to develop love in the sports consumers to guarantee the progress to loyalty in their consumers.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND RESEARCH

All the hypothesis presented in the study were accepted except for the H3 because nationality explained a negative relationship with brand love. According to the results, it can be concluded that the nationality related marketing strategies regarding the local brand will not make fans to develop love to the brand. In the other hand, marketers should use marketing strategies based in the feeling of family, cultural identification and social identity for fans to develop brand love towards their respective teams. Digital marking initiatives will encourage fans to develop brand love to their teams at a smaller degree than family and cultural identification initiatives.

The hypothesis that stat that fans who love their team will commit to the brand, regardless of the conditions or scenarios that are presented, was significantly confirmed by the results of this study. Fans that love their teams will consume the product in any of the scenarios presented in this study. The significant implication of this study is that family-related feelings towards the team will develop Brand love as an emotional attachment indicator towards their teams, and emotionally attached fans will build brand loyalty to consume their products. If teams want to increase event attendance, broadcasting ratings, purchase of licensed products and social media interaction, they need to develop loyalty in their fans. This study supports with empirical evidence that to develop brand loyalty is essential to make fans love your brand.

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