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DEVELOPING AND VALIDATING A SCALE TO MEASURE FOOTBALL TEAM LOVE

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ABSTRACT

Previous studies in sports marketing have shown that team love is a key factor influencing loyalty, satisfaction and positive word-of-mouth behaviours. Despite these positive findings, research on team love remains limited, and the concept's theoretical framework is underdeveloped. The study aims to conceptualize football team love using a grounded theory approach and to develop a scale based on this conceptualization. Through a comprehensive literature review, as well as data obtained from focus group and in-depth interviews with football fans, the study delineated the unique conceptual dimensions of team love. Using data obtained from 452 Turkish football fans, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) revealed a three-dimensional (self-team integration, infinity, and passion-driven behaviours), 12-item structure. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) further validated and refined, a three-dimensional, nine-item measurement model. This research provides an in-depth, theory-based understanding of the unique construct of football team love, offering valuable insights for both academic and practical applications. The findings lay a foundation for further research and provide strategic guidance for sports marketers to foster stronger connections between football teams and their fans.

Keywords: Football team love, self-team integration, infinity, passion-driven behaviours, scale development.

INTRODUCTION

As traditional approaches alone are insufficient to sustain brand loyalty, brands are now seeking ways to foster closer relationships with consumers, aligning with contemporary marketing paradigms. This

shift has emphasized the importance of brand-consumer relationship in numerous studies, underscoring the need for brands to establish emotional bonds with their customers (Rauschnabel et al., 2015; Palusuk et al., 2019). Consequently, there is a growing interest in conceptualizing various phenomena that represent a close brand-consumer relationship (Bairrada et al., 2018; Batra et al., 2012; Daniels, et al., 2020). One such concept is brand love, which emphasizes the emotional connection consumers develop with brands (Singh et al., 2021). Brand love is based on the emotional bond that consumers form with brands (Rajput et al., 2020). Sports fans, in particular, often form strong emotional bonds with their teams Madigan and Delaney (2009). In today's market, sports teams function as brands, with fans serving as their consumers (Hur et al., 2011; Tapp, 2004). According to Daniels et al. (2020), the relationship between sports teams and fans provides a suitable context for studying brand love. Therefore, exploring the relationship between sports clubs and their fans is crucial for understanding this unique form of brand love. In sports marketing literature, various studies highlight that team love is a precursor to significant outcomes such as loyalty, satisfaction, and positive word-of-mouth (WOM) behaviours (Shuv-Ami et al., 2018; Shuv-Ami et al., 2020; Velicia Martin et al., 2020). Despite these positive results, research on team love remains limited and the theoretical framework for this concept has yet to be fully developed (Palusuk et al., 2019).

Shuv-Ami et al. (2018) developed the Fan Love Marks Scale for sports fans, which is grounded in Kevin Roberts's Brand Love Marks model. However, this scale does not specifically address the unique characteristics of sports fans. It suggests a typology for categorizing fans that relies on descriptive classifications rather than empirically validated measures (Daniels et al, 2020). Therefore, there is no conceptual or statistical basis for determining how much love corresponds to each fan type. Fan love is not presence or absence within these typologies, instead, it varies in intensity and should be measured as a hierarchical intensity. In a related effort, Shuv-Ami et al. (2020) introduced the Love-Hate Scale which centres on the close relationship between team love and the rivalry-driven dislike of competing teams. This scale, which was developed based on social identity theory, conceptualizes in-group love as a blend of continuous emotions that coexist with an out-group hate. Thus, this approach does not focus on the unique nature of team love itself, but on the interplay between love for a team and hate for a rival team. These existing studies fall short in capturing the full conceptual scope of team love. To address this gap, grounded theory, which emphasizes phenomenological experience, offers a suitable framework for understanding complex, multidimensional constructs such as love (Batra et al., 2012). To build upon and move beyond previous research limitations, the present study will employ a theory-based approach grounded in phenomenological experience method. This approach aims to capture the unique meaning of team love in a more comprehensive manner.

Determining the conceptual framework of football team love offers significant contributions to existing literature for several reasons. As noted earlier, existing team love scales (Shuv-Ami et al., 2018; Shuv-Ami et al., 2020), developed based on brand love theories, provide only a basic framework for understanding this phenomenon. Notably, there is no team love scale specifically developed for football fans—an important gap in the research. For constructs with established theoretical frameworks, it is necessary to develop measurement tools that more comprehensively capture the unique needs of different groups (Johari et al., 2010). Fan behaviours differ according to sport type (Pope, 2017), which means that studies on fan behaviour need to account for these differences to accurately conceptualize phenomena. Otherwise, the conceptual framework may fail to reflect the true nature of the phenomenon. To determine the unique nature of a phenomenon, it is essential to first define its conceptual field. A comprehensive literature review can serve as a foundation for establishing the conceptual field (Hinkin, 1995), but it alone is insufficient (Churchill, 1979). Qualitative data collection methods, such as focus

groups and in-depth interviews, are also necessary. As explained in subsequent sections, this research utilizes focus groups and in-depth interviews based on phenomenological experience and guided by an extensive literature review, to determine the unique conceptual structure of football team love. By adopting a grounded theory approach, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the unique structure of football team love.

Daniels et al., (2020) highlighted that team love warrants further investigation for its theoretical and practical significance. Football team love, specifically, can play a critical role in theoretical research models aimed at understanding fan behaviours. Additionally, it offers valuable insights into fan-team relationships, enabling the development of targeted fan engagement strategies (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Daniels et al., 2020; Shuv-Ami et al., 2018). Football holds a central place in the sports industry, both economically and socially, generating millions of dollars of each year as a brand. The primary stakeholders in this value creation are the fans, who invest a significant amount of money, time and effort into supporting their teams. Love, as a concept, is frequently used to explain both fan and consumer behaviour (Rajput et al., 2020; Shuv-Ami et al., 2020), making football team love a significant factor in understanding fan consumption behaviours. Football also holds a prominent position within social psychology (Shuv-Ami et al., 2018), making all research into football fan behaviour a valuable addition to the field.

The main objective of this research, therefore, is to reveal the unique multidimensional conceptual field of football team love through grounded theory and to develop it into a measurable structure. To do this, we first conducted an extensive literature review, determining a conceptual foundation based on research on brand love and team love. We then conducted focus group and in-depth interviews with football fans to determine the unique attributes of football team love. Finally, using EFA and CFA, we transformed the concept of football team love into a measurable structure. The study concludes with a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications of the findings and offers directions for future research.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Interpersonal Love

Daniels et al. (2020) suggested that the literature on interpersonal love should be referenced when conceptualizing team love. Therefore, to define the conceptual structure of football team love, this study draws primarily on interpersonal love literature. Throughout history, from early civilizations to modern times, various methods have been used to understand the significance and nature of love (Reis & Aron, 2008). In general definitions, love encompasses far more than a strong sense of liking. The general psychology literature contains numerous theories addressing the phenomenon of love (Hatfield, 1988; Lee, 1973). Among these, Sternberg's (1986) Triangular Theory of Love has been a cornerstone for exploring related concepts. In this theory, the "triangle" serves as a metaphor rather than a literal geometric shape, positing that love consists of three components: intimacy, passion, and decision/commitment. Intimacy expresses the emotional dimension of love, passion refers to motivation, and decision/commitment encompasses the cognitive process of love, both short and long term (Sternberg, 1986). Numerous studies have referenced these components as representing distinct affective, cognitive and motivational aspects of love (Diessner et al., 2018).

Apart from breaking down love into components, it is also crucial to consider love as a unified whole. Love, while partly shaped by genetically driven emotions, is also a phenomenon that can be learned through observation and social role models. This insight indicates the importance of identifying prototypes according to different types of love, the majority of which remain areas for further exploration (Batra et al., 2012). Developing a detailed prototype of football team love will help obtain valid results and enhance our understanding of this concept.

Brand Love

Brand love was first investigated by Shimp and Madden (1988) based on Sternberg's (1986) interpersonal love theory, effectively adapting the concept of interpersonal love phenomenon to the relationship between a person and an object. Shimp and Madden (1988) noted that the key difference between interpersonal love and brand love lies in the fact that in brand love, the object (or brand) cannot reciprocate the customer's affection. This aspect resembles the phenomenon of football team love, where fans' love for their teams is similarly one-sided and unreciprocated, akin to a person-object relationship. The first empirical research on brand love was carried out by Ahuvia (1993), who suggested that people's intense interest in brands is subjective and varies among individuals. Roberts (2005) defined brand love as a deep attachment to charismatic brands that people feel they cannot live without. However, in some cases, this brand love can end, with individuals transferring their affection to new brands in response to various factors (Roberts, 2005). Sternberg's (1986) concepts of interpersonal love suggest a more stable attachment, a characteristic often observed in football team love, where fans rarely switch their allegiance to another team. This resistance to change reflects a distinguishing feature of team love.

In exploring brand love, the literature frequently draws on interpersonal love as a foundational concept. Batra et al. (2012), however, argued that interpersonal love may be inadequate in defining brand love and offered a more detailed conceptual framework. According to Batra et al. (2012), brand love is a relationship encompassing emotional, cognitive, behavioural, and long-term elements. Batra et al. (2012) also found that the dynamics within consumer-object relationships differ from those outlined in the triangular theory of love. Building on studies by Batra et al. (2012) and other scholars (Daniels, et al., 2020; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Grisaffe & Nguyen, 2011; Shuv-Ami et al., 2020), this study highlights the distinguishing characteristics of team love.

METHODOLOGY

Development of the Football Team Love Scale

To develop a reliable and theoretically grounded football team love scale, Churchill's (1979) scale development procedure was adopted. This approach began with an examination of the conceptual domain of the research phenomenon. Following this, items were generated through a comprehensive literature review and focus group discussions. EFA was then conducted to define the underlying research structures, and CFA test was used to validate the resulting structure (Hair et al., 2014). In addition, various validity and reliability procedures, as recommended in the literature, were applied to ensure the robustness of the scale.

Conceptual Domain Specification

Defining the conceptual domain is crucial in scale development (Churchill, 1979). To establish the conceptual domain for football team love, recent literature on the subject was carefully reviewed (Batra et al., 2012; Brakus et al., 2009; Daniels et al., 2020; Sternberg, 1997; Shuv-Ami et al., 2020). Insights from this extensive literature review provided guidance in the shaping the conceptual field (Hinkin, 1995).

Table 1

Conceptual Domain for Research Themes

Title of construct	Focus group sample	Description
Self-team integration	We portray ourselves as fans of "Ankaragücü" upon being asked to introduce yourselves.	Fans find their teams as a representation of their personal identities. It can be expressed as an overlap of the current personal identity with the team that is being supported. In this case, the fan is an important part of self-identity.
Current self-identity	If applicable by law, I will do nothing but change my name to "Galatasaray."	
Desired self-identity	What makes me who I am is Galatasaray. I have always been proud to be a fan of this team.	Having the strength provided by belonging to the team allows him/her to reach the desired identity. In this way, he/she sees himself/herself as a part of the team and is proud of it.
Infinity	If there is something unending in my life, it is Ankaragücü.	
Loyalty	I am in love with not only one thing but everything about Eskişehirspor.	It reveals that they will support their teams under all conditions and that they have strong bonds with the values associated with their teams.
Legacy	Love for Beşiktaş is the biggest legacy I can leave for my child.	They see their teams as a legacy they will pass on to future generations. This is like a mandatory task for them.
Resistance	No matter they often say Fenerbahçe have rigged, my last word would be Fenerbahçe.	It reveals that they will defend their teams against all kinds of external pressure and that they will not give up on being supporters of their teams.
Passion-driven behaviours		
Unrequited investment	Money is not important; I do not care even if I do not have a single penny in my pocket so long as Fenerbahçe is crowned champion.	It refers to the willingness of the fans to use all the resources for their teams, such as time, money, and energy. They are always ready for this voluntarily.
Obsessive passion	Our obsession is Ankaragucu, day and night.	The fans want to be irresistibly involved in all the activities associated with their team, which indicates uncontrolled, obsessive, and passionate addiction from inside out.

Focus groups are effective methods for identifying scale structures (Churchill, 1979; DeWalt et al., 2007; Wilkinson, 1998). By leveraging group dynamics that encourage participant interaction, focus groups provide a conceptual background rooted in real-life experiences (Wilkinson, 1998). They also enable the collection of large amounts of in-depth data efficiently and cost-effectively (Morgan, 1997). In this section of the research, the main goal was to develop a comprehensive conceptual domain for

the relationship with football team love through focus group analysis. Accordingly, focus group interviews were conducted to identify key dimensions of team love and to develop relevant scale items (Kitzinger, 1995).

Participants for the focus group discussions were selected through purposive sampling, targeting individuals who strongly identify with their teams. This selection targeted highly engaged fans who regularly attend games or interact with team-related content. Purposive sampling was chosen to ensure that participants possessed characteristics relevant to the phenomenon, thereby enriching the depth and quality of discussions (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Six fans from six different teams, who identified themselves as "fanatics" and expressed deep love for their teams, were selected. Two focus group sessions were conducted, each lasting between two to three hours (Kitzinger, 1995). In the first session, researchers encouraged the participants to discuss general topics related to their favourite teams without directing the conversation. The second session focused specifically on the concept of team love to establish the foundational elements of the conceptual domain. To further enhance the depth of the qualitative data obtained from focus groups, in-depth interviews were conducted with 10 fans from six different teams following McCracken's (1988) approach to in-depth interviews. Given the comprehensive nature of qualitative research, a summarized version of key quotations related to research structures is shown in Table 1.

According to Potter (2012), the discursive psychology technique is effective for uncovering how individuals experience and interpret specific phenomena. Using this technique, the transcribed data was categorized thematically in line with the research subject (Braun, & Clarke, 2006; Silverman, 2013). Following Miles and Huberman (1994), the themes identified became foundational to define the conceptual domain. Ultimately, seven sub-themes emerged, grouped into three main themes based on insights from both the literature and data obtained from the focus group interviews.

Self–Team Integration

A key component of brand love is the emotional bond between individuals and the brand (Rajput et al., 2020). For sports fans, team identity serves as a fundamental concept in explaining this emotional connection between fans and teams (Prayag et al., 2020). Theories of identification and identity have been particularly significant in understanding the dynamics of interpersonal and brand love (Batra et al., 2012; Brakus et al., 2009; Sternberg, 1986, 1997). Studies have shown that team identity is the basis of various important fan behaviours (e.g. Argan & Özgen, 2019; Dalakas & Melancon, 2012). In the interviews conducted for this research, fans demonstrated a strong identification with their teams, highlighting the important role these teams play in expressing existing identities and fostering aspirational identities (Branscombe & Wann, 1991; Heere & James, 2007). This finding aligns with existing literature on both interpersonal love and brand love (Batra et al., 2012) supporting the notion that team love is deeply rooted in identity integration.

Infinity

In studies on brand love, Batra et al. (2012) defined a long-term relationship as a commitment intended to be part of life indefinitely. Tapp (2004) observed that fan loyalty within the sports industry is influenced primarily by the current success of their teams—a condition particularly challenging in the football industry. Contrary to this, Richardson and O'Dwyre (2003) found that football fans remained loyal to their teams regardless of success. These findings reveal the enduring commitment football fans have towards their teams. Qualitative data from this study also reveal fans' sense of loyalty and commitment to a lifelong connection with their teams. The elements of legacy, loyalty, and resistance

fall under the concept of *Infinity*, as they reflect fans' commitment to an enduring bond. Unlike interpersonal love and brand love, football fans often view their loyalty as a legacy to be passed down to future generations—an important testament to the timelessness of this relationship. Additionally, fans showed resilience against external influences, which participants identified as an important indicator descriptor of their love. The concept of team loyalty, based on brand loyalty, emerges as a significant aspect of this unending relationship.

Passion-driven behaviours

Sternberg (1986, 1997) described passion within interpersonal love as a set of motivational factors that drive individuals to experience intense feelings. Based on the framework of Hatfield and Walster (1985), the role of sexuality has been noted as an influential factor in certain types of love, although other motivational factors apply in different contexts. To explain the passion underlying team love, these unique motivational factors require exploration. Sternberg (1986) suggested that passion is the initial factor that drives a person into a relationship. Similarly, Albert et al. (2008) identified passion as the first component of brand love. Fan behaviour, particularly in football, reflects a level of emotional intensity that far surpasses typical consumer actions, making "team love" distinct in its intensity and often irrationality.

Qualitative interviews with fans revealed that fan behaviours often stem from a sense of uncontrollable, almost obligatory devotion. Unlike interpersonal or brand love, team love frequently manifests through obsessive passion, a concept essential in understanding the fervent actions of fans. Batra et al. (2012) referred to the "willingness to invest resources" as an expression of passion within brand love, and this notion similarly aligns with team love. However, a notable difference here is that fans are uniquely willing to invest all their resources in their teams without any expectation of personal gain. This phenomenon of unrequited investment thus serves as a defining characteristic of passion-driven behaviours in the football team love relationship.

Item Generation

Based on a comprehensive literature review, focus group discussions, and data from in-depth interviews, an initial list of 36-items was created, organized into seven sub-themes within three main themes that collectively represent the conceptual domain. Following established scale development methodologies (Mrad & Cui, 2017; Freling et al., 2011), nine statements were removed due to ambiguity, redundancy, or other identified issues.

A total of 27 items created in line with the above-mentioned guidelines were then submitted to three academic experts in sports marketing. These experts were asked to evaluate each item for its representativeness of the respective structure by categorizing it as either "representative" or "non-representative" (Zaichkowsky, 1985). They were also asked to identify any uncertain or complex wording to ensure the clarity of each statement (Mrad & Cui, 2017; Podsakoff et al., 2012). According to Saxe and Weitz, (1982) at least 50 percent of the expert evaluators must deem each item as "representative" to meet acceptability standards. Based on this feedback, an additional six items were excluded from the research, resulting in a pilot survey consisting of 21 statements.

Scale Purification

Exploratory Factor Analysis

A 21-item questionnaire was prepared, using a 5-point Likert scale (5-Strongly Agree; 1-Strongly Disagree). According to Comrey and Lee (2013), sample sizes for pilot studies should range between 100 and 500 participants, depending on the number of items. Based on Churchill's (1979) guideline, a convenience sample of 452 self-identified football fans was obtained. Reflecting the general fandom demographic, most participants were male (70.6%) and aged between 18 and 24 (42%), suggesting that the sample is representative of the general football fan population.

The EFA test was conducted to identify the factor structure of the scale (Hair et al., 2014). Initially, Bartlett's sphericity test and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure were examined, with results exceeding the recommended thresholds in the literature (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). The EFA revealed three factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, and items with factor loadings above 0.7 were retained in each factor, establishing a strong factorial structure (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). As a result of these analyses, a three-factor, 12-item structure explaining 80% of the total variance was obtained (Table 2).

Table 2

Results for EFA analysis

Item	1	2	3
	Eigenvalues % of Variance (55.56)	Eigenvalues % of Variance (15.39)	Eigenvalues % of Variance (9.94)
9	0.82		
10	0.80		
12	0.86		
13	0.89		
1		0.79	
4		0.85	
5		0.80	
7		0.79	
16			0.75
17			0.89
19			0.89
20			0.87

Notes: Extraction method: principal component analysis; Rotation method: varimax with Kaiser Normalization

Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated to determine the reliability of each factor, with all factors showing values above 0.7. Additionally, the inter-factor correlations were significant, with none of the values exceeding 0.85, which supports the external validity of the scale (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). These results provide strong evidence of the scale's reliability and validity (Table 3).

Table 3

Correlation Matrix for Scale Structures

	1	2	3
Self-team integration	1.000		
Infinity	0.59**	1.000	
Passion-driven behaviours	0.57**	0.41**	1.000
Average	3.7	4.1	3.0
Standard deviation	1.2	.97	1.3

Notes: *p<0.01

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Tabachnick and Fidell (2013) suggested that normality in social science research can be assessed by checking kurtosis and skewness values with George and Mallery (2010) indicating that reference values between +2.0 and -2.0 support a normal distribution. Analysis confirmed that the research data fell within the stated range, satisfying the normality assumption.

Initial goodness-of-fit indices showed that the three-factor and 12-item measurement model did not adequately fit the data, suggesting the need for model specification (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Examination of the indicator loading matrix led to the removal of three items that had high loadings on multiple factors. As a result of re-specification, the revised three-factor, nine-item model—comprising *Self-Team Integration (3 items)*, *Infinity (3 items)*, and *Passion-driven behaviours (3 items)*—achieved satisfactory fit values (χ^2 : 3379.64, χ^2 / df : 3.47, GFI: .96, AGFI: .93, CFI: .98, TLI: .97, IFI: .98, RMSEA: .073), indicating a strong model fit.

Table 4

Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results and AVE Values

Self-team integration (AVE: .83; CR: .94)	Factor Load
I feel close to my team	0.83
My team is part of myself	0.94
The success of my team is my success.	0.96
Infinity (AVE: .67; CR: .86)	
My love for my team will last forever	0.82
I will pass on my love for my team to future generations	0.76
No matter what happens, I will continue to be a fan of this team	0.87
Passion-driven behaviours (AVE: .82; CR: .93)	
I can do anything for my team	0.89
Life has no meaning without a team	0.91
Nothing is more important than my team	0.92

Note: AVE: Average variance extracted value; CR: Composite reliability

Factor loadings and composite reliability (CR) values of all items were examined to ensure discriminant validity following Nunnally and Bernstein (1994). The analysis showed that both the CR values and factor loadings for all items exceeded 0.7. For convergent validity, average variance extracted (AVE) values for each factor were calculated, with all values exceeding 0.5. These results confirm that the football team love scale has adequate validity and reliability.

DISCUSSIONS

Football has evolved into a major international commercial activity with a strong global appeal. In today's competitive market, football teams must compete with other forms of leisure activities (Bauer et al., 2005) to succeed (Ratten & Ratten, 2011). Consequently, the concept of football team love has become a focal point in sports marketing. Within general marketing literature, constructs such as loyalty, satisfaction, and WOM are associated with team love, underscoring its importance. The current research identified the multidimensional conceptual structure of the football team love scale, validating its reliability and applicability. By conceptualizing a distinct form of team love—specifically football team love—our results offer a more comprehensive understanding of this unique phenomenon. Using focus groups and in-depth interviews, we conceptualized football team love as it is perceived by fans, rooted in their real experiences. The EFA and CFA procedures further validated this conceptual structure, transforming it into a reliable measurement tool. Thus, this study presents an instrument designed to provide an in-depth understanding of the unique dimensions of football team love.

While previous studies have explored team love, they have lacked measurement tools grounded in theory and specifically tailored to football fans. The current research addressed that gap, introducing a multidimensional, valid and reliable scale for football team love. By addressing prior limitations and inconsistencies in the conceptualization of team love, our study advances a refined understanding of this concept. Consequently, our findings contribute significantly to both theoretical and practical fields, highlighting critical areas for further research. Additionally, the results suggest actionable strategies that football clubs can employ to strengthen relationships between football teams and fans, thereby unlocking potential areas for future research and strategic development.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings from this research suggest that football team love is an emotional relationship based on fan-club interactions. The conceptual structure of football team love, consisting of three main components—infinity, self-team integration and passion-driven behaviours—has been empirically proven through scale development approaches suggested in existing literature (Churchill, 1979; Hair et al., 2014; Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994). These results underscore several key theoretical implications of the research. Groeppel-Klein et al. (2010) noted that commitment fans remain loyal to their teams regardless of circumstances, indicating that loyalty and its associated constructs are fundamental to team love. In particular, the infinity component, identified in the exploratory research represents a higher order, abstract construct that expresses the enduring nature of team love. The infinity component encompasses three sub-features that reflect the desire of fans to maintain lifelong relationships with their teams. In brand love, Batra et al. (2012) emphasized the importance of long-term commitment, while Sternberg (1986) defined commitment in interpersonal relationships. The commitment aspect in interpersonal and brand love aligns with, yet differs from the infinity component unique to football team love. Within this research, legacy emerged as a core feature of infinity, distinguishing football team love from brand love and interpersonal love. Unlike interpersonal love, where love is not typically seen as something to pass on to future generations, fans view their devotion to their team as a legacy to be shared with their children or future supporters. Traits such as loyalty and resistance to outside influence characterize the infinity component, echoing aspects of brand love yet also highlighting the unique characteristics specific to football team love. These findings affirm shared qualities between brand and team love while also highlighting the distinct characteristics that define football team love.

One essential component in football fans' love for their teams is passion-driven behaviour. This component encompasses features such as unrequited investment and obsessive passion, specific to football team love. Batra et al. (2012) highlighted the willingness to invest resources as an essential feature. In this study, this aspect has been framed as the fans' unrequited investment, representing their love for their teams. Fans who are willing to spend their resources without expecting any functional benefits in return offer significant evidence of the distinction between team love and brand love. Additionally, obsessive passion has emerged in this study as an important component of football team love. Considering the intensity and irrationality that often characterize fan behaviours—far exceeding typical consumer passion and loyalty—this finding contributes significantly to the unique nature of team love. The self-team integration component provides evidence of shared characteristics between interpersonal love and football team love in general. Market segmentation is an important stage in effective marketing, particularly in understanding target groups (McDonald et al., 2003). The football team love scale can serve as an important tool for clubs to classify their fan base, enabling them to develop targeted fan engagement strategies. Consequently, football clubs can use the football team love scale to create more effective fan relationship strategies. (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Daniels et al., 2020; Shuv-Ami et al., 2018).

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

For sports marketers in the football sector, where economic factors are increasingly important, a primary objective is to deepen relationships with potential fans. The high-level, abstract components we identify as integral to football team love can guide more communication activities that enhance perceptions among less-engaged fans.

However, the unique nature of football fan love—which is marked by enduring, unrequited love—can be vulnerable to overly commercial communication activities. This presents a significant risk for sports marketers: if fans begin to feel like mere customers instead of a part of a larger family, it may harm the infinite and selfless bond within the fan-team relationship, reducing it to a commercial identity. By grounding marketing communication in the team's corporate values, clubs can strengthen team love and build lasting, meaningful connections with their fans.

The football team love scale offers valuable insights for football team marketers in developing strategies that foster fan loyalty, satisfaction and positive WOM behaviours. The development of more intense team love often relies on social bonds formed among fans (Daniels et al., 2020). While football team love is primarily a personal mental attachment, it is crucial for football clubs to reinforce and nurture this connection through their communication strategies with their fans. Thus, by aligning their strategies with the conceptual structure of football team love, marketers can enhance connections to achieve successful results.

Fans with high levels of team love hold significant economic potential for their teams. However, the literature also highlights the negative effects of excessive team love (Daniels et al., 2020; Shuv-Ami et al., 2018). Particularly, animosity towards rival teams, which is highly associated with intense loyalty (Shuv-Ami et al., 2020) may lead to disruptive or violent incidents. Such behaviours not only harm the team's image but may also alienate wider fan groups from the team (Daniels et al., 2020). Addressing these "brand sabotage" events (Kähr, et al., 2016) can be costly for clubs. Therefore, using the measurement tool developed in the current study in conjunction with the scales measuring hate and

violence can be a proactive approach for clubs to identify fans prone to these risks and enabling them to take preventive measures.

CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This study provides significant contributions to both theory and practice; however, as with all scientific research, it has certain limitations that can guide future studies. The primary limitation is that the study was carried out in a single country, offering an opportunity for future research to explore football team love across diverse cultural contexts. Besides that, it would be valuable to develop team love scales specific to other sports and compare the findings with those of the football team love scale in future studies. Future research could also enhance the validity of the football team love construct by using nomologic network analysis, thereby broadening the understanding of how football team love influences fan behaviours and outcomes. Cultural differences represent another key factor in scale development research, as adapting the football team love scale for use in varied cultural settings would enhance its versatility and relevance. Since this study employed a cross-sectional design, it captures fan reactions to team love at a specific point in time. Longitudinal research, however, could provide insights into how football team love evolves and deepens over time. Finally, ethnographic research focusing on specific fan groups with high levels of team love could yield a richer understanding of the unique characteristics and expressions of team love among dedicated fan bases.

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