

Fan behavior and team identification: Which is the best predictor of responses to football sponsorship?

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Abstract

Football has become increasingly attractive to global investors, shareholders, and commercial partners. Sponsoring partners contribute substantially to the revenue that supports team success and enhances fan engagement. Fan's passion and behavior towards their teams play a central role in the global development of football. The aim of this study was to determine which conceptual model (M1 or M2) more effectively explains fans' intention to purchase products from sponsoring companies. M1 used team identification as a predictor, while M2 focused on fan behavioral loyalty. A total of 2,647 individuals, self-identified as fans of two professional Portuguese football teams, participated in the study. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted to evaluate the models. Model 2 (M2) explained 39.0% of the variance in purchase intention ($R^2 = .39$), outperforming Model 1 (M1), which explained 30.0% ($R^2 = .297$). Behavioral loyalty ($\beta = .38$, $p < .001$) was a stronger predictor than team identification ($\beta = .16$, $p < .001$). Two conclusions can be highlighted. The first conclusion was that model 2 (M2), which included fans' behavioral loyalty, was more effective in explaining fans' purchase intentions than model 1 (M1). Fans' behavioral loyalty to the team had the strongest influence on their attitude and purchase intention towards the sponsoring company. The second conclusion is that, in addition to passion, fan behavior must also be considered. An important advantage of sponsorship for a company is the opportunity to associate itself with a sports team that has a fan base with behavioral loyalty. The suggestions for sports clubs managers and sponsors are extremely crucial, should prioritize strategies that build fan loyalty to boost sponsorship effectiveness and ROI.

Keywords: Attendance, Fans, Football, Soccer, Sponsorship, Team identification.

Introduction

"Football without fans is nothing. It could be the greatest game in the world but if there are no people to watch it, it becomes nothing. Fans are the livelihood of the game" – Jock Stein¹.

The passion and behavior of fans towards sports teams are the driving force behind the development of football on a global scale. Additionally, sponsors' investment guarantees much of the revenue needed to increase the competitiveness of football teams, which in turn, leads to an increase in passion and loyal fan behavior.

The figures are impressive. Football is the world's most popular sport, with more than 3.5 billion fans worldwide. Europe's 'Big Five' professional leagues are at the heart of this adoration, generating record revenues of 19.6 billion euros in the 2022-2023 season (Deloitte, 2024). In Portugal, Sport Lisboa e Benfica achieved a historic milestone in the 2025 presidential elections, with 85,422 members voting, representing the highest voter turnout ever seen in a sports club on a global scale (Record, 2025). The Bundesliga (Germany) achieved the highest average attendance of all European football leagues, with 38,973 spectators per game in the 2023-2024 season (Saleh, 2024). Borussia Dortmund was the club with the record attendance at home games with 81,305 spectators per game (2023-2024) (Transfermarkt, 2024), while in the USA it was Atlanta United FC, with 46,831 spectators (Worldfootball, 2024). But it's Real Madrid FC that has an impressive 500 million social media followers (Real Madrid, 2023).

Commercial organizations invest in sport sponsorship with the expectation that fans' favorable attitudes toward their chosen team will extend to the sponsoring brand via the sponsor-sponsee relationship (Madrigal, 2001) and, ultimately enhancing financial performance (Deitz et al., 2012). And that is why sponsors' investment in football continues to grow. Adidas has signed a ten-year sponsorship deal with Real Madrid FC, garnering attention due to the big amounts involved (1,100 million euros) (Carpio, 2018). However, the record investment in football team sponsorships was Adidas' deal with Manchester United, announced in 2023, for 115 million dollars a year until 2035 (Rim, 2023).

¹ Scottish football player and manager (5 October 1922-10 September 1985).

It has long been known that these investments seek returns and results in terms of communication, marketing and sales (Meenaghan, 2001). However, oddly enough, survey after survey has shown that managers do not measure the results of sponsorship (Cornwell, 2020). For this reason, one of the main objectives of our research is to analyze the effects of sponsorship activity on consumers and fans (Ruth & Simonin, 2003). Cornwell and Kwon (2020) found that research on sponsorship has largely concentrated on its effectiveness in targeting consumer audiences, resulting in substantial scholarly output. Nevertheless, the literature still presents conflicting and ambiguous evidence on the drivers of sponsorship effectiveness (Kim et al., 2015).

Recently, it has been emphasized that evaluation is an ongoing relationship between the sports property and the sponsor, which can build brand equity for both entities (Cornwell et al., 2024) and that there are still expanding areas of research with theoretical potential for new incursions (Varea-Calero et al., 2025).

For example, this continuous evaluation relationship in the context of professional football clubs has shown a positive effect of fan team identification on the purchase intentions of sponsors' products (Silva & Verissimo, 2020; Silva, 2024), although in some cases, this effect has not been confirmed at all (Eddy & Cork, 2019; Koo & Lee, 2019). Diverging results have also been observed, with some studies finding that attitude towards the sponsor had a direct positive effect on purchase intentions (Koronios & Dimitropoulos, 2020; Silva, 2024; Zaharia et al., 2016). However, other studies have not confirmed these results for purchase intentions (Bachleda et al., 2016; Eddy & Cork, 2019; Papadimitriou et al., 2016; Silva & Verissimo, 2020) or actual purchase behaviors (Zaharia et al., 2016). For these reasons, the question remains as to which determinants are more robust. Do fans develop stronger purchase intentions towards the products of sponsoring companies 1) when their level of identification with the team is higher, or 2) when team loyalty behaviors are more common?

To answer this question, two models were designed. The first model (M1) aimed to assess the predictive capacity of team identification on intention to buy the sponsoring company's products. The second model (M2) aimed to determine the predictive capacity of fans' behavioral loyalty on purchase intention. In this way, we will be able to say which is the most powerful predictor of the formation of purchase intention the sponsoring company's products. Is it identification with the sports team? Or is it the fans' behavioral loyalty to the sports team? The purpose of this study is to determine which model (M1 or M2) has greater explanatory power for the intention to purchase the sponsoring company's products, by testing six hypotheses: three for model M1 (M1H1, M1H2, M1H3) and three for model M2 (M2H1, M2H2, M2H3) in order to achieve six objectives:

- (i) to determine the direct effects of identification with the team on the attitude towards the sponsoring company.
- (ii) to determine the direct effects of identification with the team on the intention to buy the sponsors' products.
- (iii) to determine the direct effects of attitude towards the sponsoring company on the intention to buy the sponsors' products.
- (iv) to determine the direct effects of fans' behavioral loyalty on the attitude towards the sponsoring company.
- (v) to determine the direct effects of fans' behavioral loyalty on the intention to buy the sponsors' products.
- (vi) to determine the direct effects of attitude towards the sponsoring company on the intention to buy the sponsors' products.

We believe that fan passion and loyalty are the lifeblood of any club. Therefore, it is essential to clarify the power of these predictors: 1) team identification, and 2) fans' behavioral loyalty.

Within the sponsorship literature, a major line of inquiry centers on understanding the impact of sponsorship activities on consumers - a perspective described by Ruth and Simonin (2003, p. 20) as the "consumer-focused view of sponsorship", and by Cornwell and Maignan (1998, p. 2) as the "measurement of sponsorship effects."

In our case, it is a perspective driven towards measuring 1) the responses of a football team fans and 2) the factors that determine these responses.

The factors studied in this investigation were a) Team identification (A1), b) Fan loyalty (A2), as (A) Characteristics of the team, sporting event or activity, c) Attitude towards the sponsoring company (C1) and d) Purchase intention towards sponsoring company's products (C2), as (C) Responses to sponsorship: affective and conative responses, as shown in Figure 1, which provides an overview of the factors determining responses to sports sponsorship (Silva, 2020).

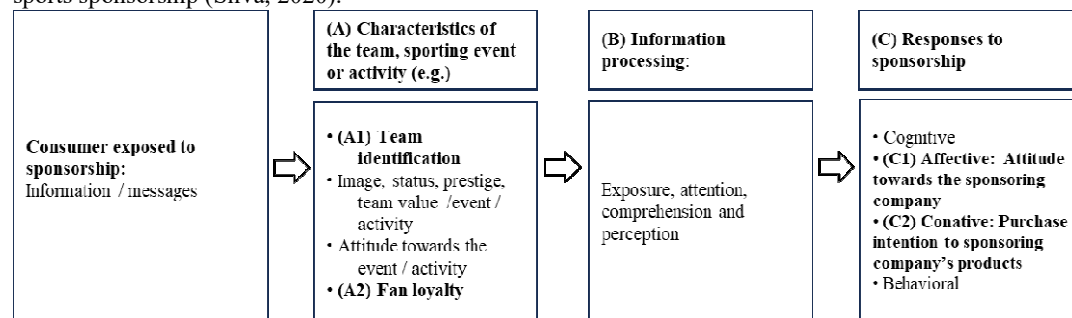
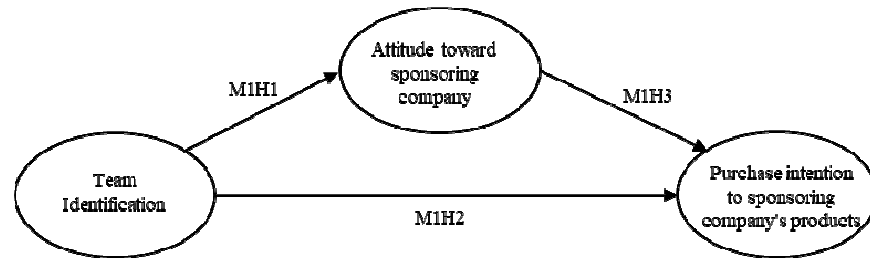
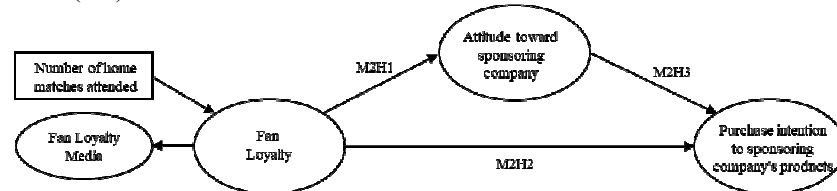


Figure 1. Systematization of the effects of sponsorship determinants on consumers responses. Adapted from Silva (2020).

Considering team identification as a central determining factor, conceptual model 1 (M1) was designed. In turn, the conceptual model 2 (M2) incorporates the behavioral perspective, using fans' behavioral loyalty as the key determinant of their responses to sponsorship, as shown in Figure 2.



Conceptual Model 1 (M1)



Conceptual Model 2 (M2)

Figure 2. Conceptual Model 1 (M1) and Conceptual Model 2 (M2).

Conceptual Model 1 (M1) - Team identification

Conceptual Model 1 (M1) assumes that team identification is a central factor in determining fans' responses to sponsorship, based on the following proposition: (1) fans' identification with the sports team serves as the foundation for the formation of (2) a favorable attitude towards the sponsoring company, which in turn influences the response to the sponsorship expressed in the development of (3) the intention to purchase the sponsoring company's products, (See Figure 2).

Fan identification, as conceptualized by Branscombe and Wann (1992), represents the extent to which individuals perceive themselves as fans, express emotional attachment to a team, and integrate that team into their self-identity. This relationship is frequently interpreted through Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which emphasizes that individuals tend to evaluate their in-group (their team) more positively than out-groups (rival teams).

Fans who exhibit a strong identification with their sports team often extend their favorable bias to organizations that align themselves with the team through sponsorship. Consequently, such fans tend to express positive emotions, attitudes, and behavioral intentions toward companies that sponsor or otherwise support their team (Silva, 2024).

This trend can be explained by two rationales. The first is that sponsoring companies provide resources that help improve the success of teams to a large extent. Consequently, as the team's success increases, the fans' identification tends to increase. This will also increase the favorable attitude towards sponsoring companies (Kim & Kim, 2009). The second is that sponsors who support the sports team can be seen as paternalistic members of the group. This positive view of sponsors is supported by two factors of the team identification construct (Ashmore et al., 2004), 1) team evaluation, and 2) affective commitment to the team, which can lead to positive effects on the formation of the intention to purchase sponsors' products.

Empirical studies have established that fan identification plays a crucial role in shaping fans' reactions to sponsorship activities, positively affecting their attitudes toward sponsoring firms (Biscaia et al, 2014; Deitz et al. 2012; Jaberri & Barkhordar, 2022; Koo & Lee, 2019; Koronios et al., 2022; Silva & Verissimo, 2020; Yagiz, 2023). Most studies report that fans who identify more strongly with their team demonstrate greater purchase intentions toward sponsors' products than those with lower identification (Alexandris & Tsiotsou, 2012; Deitz et al., 2012; Jaberri & Barkhordar, 2022; Kim et al., 2010; Koronios et al., 2016; Parker & Fink, 2010; Deitz et al., 2012; Silva & Verissimo 2020; Silva, 2024; Yagiz, 2023). Yet, this pattern has not been universally observed, as some findings did not confirm the expected effect. (Eddy & Cork, 2019; Koo & Lee, 2019).

Several studies have also shown the existence of positive effects of the attitude towards the sponsoring company on the intention to purchase the sponsor's products (Dos-Santos et al., 2016; Kamath et al., 2020; Kim & Kim, 2018; Koo & Lee, 2019; Koronios et al, 2020; Koronios et al., 2021; Koronios et al., 2022; Moharana et al., 2023; Olson, 2010; Nguyen & Vu, 2022; Silva, 2024; Zaharia et al., 2016), although divergent results have also been observed (Bachleda et al., 2016; Eddy & Cork, 2019; Papadimitriou et al., 2016; Silva & Verissimo, 2020).

Despite some discordant results, we have formulated the following hypotheses, which structure the M1 conceptual model:

M1H1: Fans' identification with the sports team has a positive and significant effect on the attitude towards the sponsoring company;

M1H2: Fans' identification with the sports team has a positive and significant effect on the intention to buy sponsors' products; and

M1H3: Attitude towards the sponsoring company has a positive and significant effect on the intention to buy sponsors' products.

Conceptual Model 2 (M2) - Fan loyalty

Conceptual Model 2 (M2) assumes that fans' behavioral loyalty is a central factor in determining responses to sponsorship, based on the following proposition: (1) fans' behavioral loyalty, expressed by loyalty to the media, and the number of home games attended, acts as a source for the formation of (2) favorable attitude towards the sponsoring company, which in turn affects the response to sponsorship expressed in the development of (3) intention to purchase the sponsoring company's products (See Figure 2).

Behavioral loyalty of fans towards the sports team refers to the real actions of the spectator that can be observed by: (1) the engagement with team-related media content, including official websites and social media platforms (Koronios et al., 2020), and (2) the frequency of home attendance at the team's games (Bodet & Bernache-Assolant, 2011).

Physical presence at games in the stadium provides an emotional involvement for fans triggered by the stadium atmosphere (Uhrich & Benkenstein, 2014) and the drama of the cheering squads. Fans at the stadium, unlike at home, are dressed (and sometimes even painted) in the team's colors, they hug, dance, sing and shout for their favorite team, they even try to distract the opposing players.

Consumption of team-related media is an expression of the fans' attachment to the team, so much so that over 3.2 billion people have watched the Premier League, making it the most watched football league in the world (Wright, 2022).

The behavioral element of fans embedded in Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), argues that individuals tend to engage in behavioral actions that are directly linked to the group (Ashmore et al., 2004), in our case, the sports team with which they identify. These behavioral actions, such as wearing clothing with the team's colors or logo, are elements that support fan identification. It is therefore plausible that they could influence the purchase intentions of the sponsoring company's products, as sponsors are seen as elements that favor the team. Although it is admissible, the results of fan loyalty as a determinant in the context of football are rare, although positive effects have been observed for the use of the website and social media on attitude towards sponsors (Koronios & Dimitropoulos, 2020) and fan loyalty (merchandise loyalty, media loyalty) on purchase intentions (Silva, 2024).

In turn, it was found that the number of games watched at home contributed significantly to behavioral loyalty, which was shown to have significant positive effects on the formation of the intention to buy products from the team's sponsoring company (Silva, 2024). Nonetheless, findings by Smith et al. (2008) suggest that attendance at sporting events has little to no effect on consumers' purchase intentions.

Despite this divergence, considering the behavioral experience of fans' emotional involvement triggered by the stadium atmosphere, it is likely that behavioral loyalty could have a significant positive effect on attitudes towards and purchase intentions of the sponsoring company's products.

We have therefore formulated the following hypotheses, which structure the M2 conceptual model:

M2H1: Fans' behavioral loyalty to the sports team has a positive and significant effect on the attitude towards the sponsoring company;

M2H2: Fans' behavioral loyalty to the sports team has a positive and significant effect on the intention to buy sponsors' products; and

M2H3: Attitude towards the sponsoring company has a positive and significant effect on the intention to buy sponsors' products.

Material and methods

Participants

The sample comprised individuals who self-identified as supporters of the Portuguese football clubs Sport Lisboa e Benfica (SLB) or Sporting Clube de Portugal (SCP), thereby representing authentic fans rather than a student-based population. According to UEFA data (Sportmultimedia, 2014), SLB holds the record for the largest number of registered supporters among European football clubs, with approximately 235,000 members, followed by FC Bayern Munich. More recently, Benfica reported a record-breaking participation in its 2025 presidential elections, with 85,422 members casting their votes, the highest turnout ever recorded for any sports club worldwide (Record, 2025).

SCP ranks as the third-largest Portuguese club in terms of membership, with 102,000 registered supporters (Media Capital Digital, 2013). Both clubs maintain sponsorship partnerships with two of Portugal's most prominent beer brands.

Participants' ages ranged from 16 to 75 years. A convenience sampling method was used, targeting readers of the digital sports newspaper *A Bola* (www.abola.pt), which records over 122 million monthly page views (A Bola, 2020). Data were collected via an online survey published on *A Bola*'s homepage.

Respondents were predominantly male (95.1%), aged 16–75 years ($M = 33.1$, $SD = 12.02$). A majority were single (58.1%) or married (34.3%), with 39.0% holding a bachelor's degree and 36.8% a high school diploma. Employment status showed that 57.4% were employed and 25.3% were students. Sport Lisboa e Benfica supporters represented 58.2% of the sample. On average, fans attended 4.78 matches over the past two seasons ($M_{\text{home}} = 5.20$; $M_{\text{away}} = 4.35$).

Instruments

In line with methodological guidelines for the validation of measurement instruments (Vallerand, 1989), the questionnaires were translated from English into Portuguese and contextually adapted to fit the specific characteristics of the study.

The Team Identification construct was measured using nine items derived from the Team Identification Scale (TIS), as adapted by Dimmock and Grove (2006); Attitude Towards the Sponsoring Company was measured by two items adapted from Gwinner and Swanson (2003). Fan Loyalty Media was measured by reference to three items, adapted from various authors (Bauer et al., 2008; Fink et al., 2002; Funk & Pastore, 2000). The number of home games attended was assessed using an open-ended question adapted from Bodet & Bernache-Assollant (2011). Purchase Intentions were measured through three items, adapted from Biscaia et al. (2013), Madrigal (2001) and Kim et al. (2010). All responses to the scale were made on a continuum from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The items are listed in Table 1.

Procedures

The data collection process involved an online survey hosted on the A Bola website. A total of 4,913 individuals participated, of which 2,647 valid responses satisfied the inclusion criteria and were retained for analysis. The study employed a self-administered, cross-sectional design, focusing on fans of Sport Lisboa e Benfica (SLB) and Sporting Clube de Portugal (SCP), the two largest clubs in Portugal's Professional Football League.

Statistical analysis

Structural equation modelling (SEM) was conducted using AMOS software (Analysis of Moment Structures, version 20.0) (Arbuckle, 2007), applying the Maximum Likelihood (ML) estimation method in line with the following assumptions: (1) appropriate sample size (Hair et al., 2019); (2) acceptable asymmetry values for SEM, with $|Sk| < 2-3$ and $|Ku| < 7-10$ (Finney & DiStefano, 2006); and (3) verification of no multicollinearity through the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), where values below 5 are deemed acceptable (O'Brien, 2007). To evaluate the significance of coefficients, a Z-test (Critical Ratio and p-value) was performed in AMOS.

The Bollen-Stine Bootstrap method, with 2,000 resamples, was applied to assess the significance of direct, indirect, and total effects. Results were considered statistically significant when p-values were below .05. Reliability analysis (see Table 1) showed Composite Reliability (CR) values for each factor exceeding the .7 threshold (Hair et al., 2019), with factor loadings $\geq .567$, indicating statistical significance and acceptable internal consistency (Hair et al., 2019). All six constructs and their respective factors demonstrated adequate convergent validity, as indicated by Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values above .5, in accordance with Hair et al. (2019).

The constructs examined showed evidence of discriminant validity, which was assessed by comparing the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values with the squared correlations between constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), as well as by analyzing the correlations among constructs (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). The only exception was CAI and PEI, which did not meet the discriminant validity criteria and were therefore merged into a single factor named Cognitive–Affective and Personal Evaluative Identification (CAPEI).

These results are presented in Table 2. The results show that the model had acceptable fit, although the chi-square did not exhibit a perfect fit:

M1 [$\chi^2 (453) = 945.94$, B-S, ($p < .001$), $\chi^2/df = 13.13$]

M2 [$\chi^2 (61) = 882.15$, B-S, ($p < .001$), $\chi^2/df = 14.46$].

Following Byrne's (2010) recommendations, seven indices were

M1 considered, which all showed good fit: [PCFI = .751, CFI = 0.959, TLI = .948 and RMSEA = .068, P (RMSEA $\leq .05$) = .000; IC90% (.067 - .076), GFI = .946, PGFI = .649 and SRMR = 1.34).

M2 considered, which all showed good fit: [PCFI = .759, CFI = 0.961, TLI = .950 and RMSEA = .071, P (RMSEA $\leq .05$) = .000; IC90% (.067 - .067), GFI = .952, PGFI = .638 and SRMR = 1.09).

Table 1. Standardized factor loadings, composite reliability coefficients, and average variance extracted for the measurement models.

Constructs/items	β	Composite Reliability (CR)	AVE
TI - Team identification			
CAI - Cognitive/affective identification		.734	.481
CAI1 - I think of my favorite team [team name] as part of who I am.	.783**		
CAI2 - My favorite team's [team name] successes are my successes.	.649**		
CAI3 - Attributes that define fans of my favorite team [team name] apply to me also.	.641**		
PEI - Personal evaluative identification		.822	.606
PEI1 - My favorite team [team name] has a lot to be proud of.	.779**		
PEI2 - I am proud to be a fan of my favorite team [team name].	.750**		
PEI3 - My favorite team [team name] is worth supporting.	.806**		
OEI - Other evaluative identification		.773	.532
OEI1 - Others have a positive view of my favorite team [team name].	.759**		
OEI2 - Others respect my favorite team [team name].	.736**		
OEI3 - Most people consider my favorite team [team name] to be better than rival teams.	.693**		
A - Attitude towards sponsor company		.928	.866
A1 - Negative / Positive.	.944**		
A4 - Unsatisfactory / Satisfactory	.918**		
LM - Fan Loyalty Media		.744	.498
LM1 - I have watched games of my favorite team on TV.	.565**		
LM4 - Read about the [team name] in the newspaper.	.685**		
LM5 - I watch TV for news about the [team name].	.841**		
LME - Fan Loyalty Merchandise		.913	.725
LME1 - I buy [team name] clothing (T-shirts, caps, etc.).	.822**		
LME2 - I wear [team name] apparel on a regular basis.	.927**		
LME3 - I often wore the colors of [team name].	.794**		
LME4 - I often wore the logo of [team name].	.857**		
PI - Purchase intentions of the sponsor's products		.914	.781
PI1 - I would be more likely to buy of [company/brand name] over its competitors.	.880**		
PI2 - Whenever possible, I try to buy products made by [company/brand name] that sponsor the team [team name].	.965**		
PI3 - I am likely to buy more products from [company/brand name] sponsoring [team name].	.791**		

Notes: $n = 2,647$; β , standardized factor loadings; CR, composite reliability coefficients; AVE, average variance extracted. ** $p < 0.001$.

Constructs under analysis presented discriminant validity, which was verified by comparing AVE scores and the squared correlation of each construct (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), as well as the correlation between each construct (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). Only CAI and PEI failed to achieve discriminant validity, leading to their combination in one factor called Cognitive-Affective and Personal Evaluative Identification (CAPEI), as described in Table 2.

Table 2. Correlation matrix between constructs, AVE and correlation among factors squared.

	CAI	PEI	OEI	A	LM	LME	PI
CAI	ϕ 0.742** ϕ^2 0.551						
PEI	ϕ .860** ϕ^2 .740	.810**					
OEI	ϕ .080** ϕ^2 .258	.527**	.734**				
A	ϕ .266** ϕ^2 .071	.287**	.303**	.925**			
LM	ϕ .662** ϕ^2 .438	.695**	.458**	.252**	.726**		
LME	ϕ .607** ϕ^2 .368	.396**	.333**	.203**	.445**	.851**	
PI	ϕ .334** ϕ^2 .112	.221**	.263**	.521**	.220**	.332**	.878**
Mean	5.75	5.71	5.02	4.94	6.14	4.01	3.87
Standard deviation	.93	.73	.97	1.31	.95	1.05	2.05
AVE	.481	.606	.532	.866	.498	.725	.781

ϕ = Correlation between the constructs; ϕ^2 = correlation among the factors squared. ** $p < 0.001$; * $p < 0.05$; ns Not significant. CAI - Cognitive/affective identification; PEI - Personal evaluative identification; OEI - Other evaluative identification; A - Attitude towards sponsor company; LM - Fan Loyalty Media; LME - Fan Loyalty Merchandise; PI - Purchase intentions of the sponsor's products.

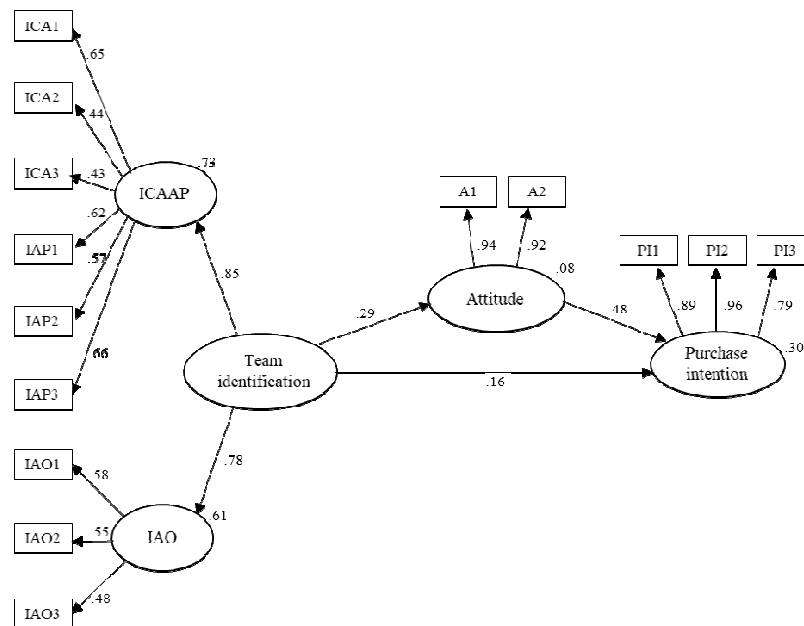
Results

The results show that the two models (M1 and M2) exhibited an acceptable fit, although the chi-square did not exhibit a perfect fit. Following Byrne's (2010) recommendations, seven indices were considered, all of which showed an acceptable to good level of fit, as shown in Table 3.

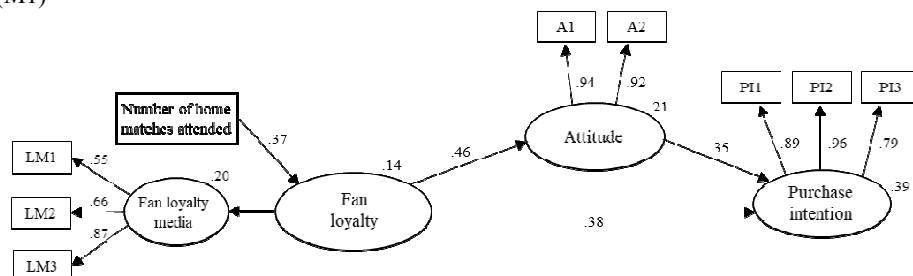
The conceptual model 2 (M2) showed an explained variance of 29.7 per cent and Model 1 revealed an explained variance of 30.0 per cent, as shown in Table 3.

In both models, our hypotheses were confirmed (Table 5) with a path coefficient (β) that was significant at the .05 level. As can be seen in Figure 1, conceptual model 1 (M1) showed an ability of 29.70% to accurately predict purchase intentions for sponsor products. This result shows that fan identification with the team had a significant positive direct effect ($\beta = .29$, $p < .001$) on attitude towards the sponsoring company and a significant positive direct effect ($\beta = .16$, $p < .001$) on purchase intentions for the sponsor's products. Similarly, attitude towards the sponsoring company had a significant direct and positive effect of ($\beta = .48$, $p < .001$) on purchase intentions of the sponsor's products. Hypotheses M1H1, M1H2, and M1H3 were therefore confirmed.

The conceptual model 2 (M2) showed an ability of 39.0% to accurately predict purchase intentions for the sponsor's products, as can be seen in Figure 1. This result shows that fan loyalty had a significant direct positive effect ($\beta = .46$, $p < .001$) on attitude towards the sponsoring company and ($\beta = .38$, $p < .001$) directly on purchase intentions for the sponsor's products. Similarly, attitude towards the sponsor company had a significant direct and positive effect of ($\beta = .35$, $p < .001$) on purchase intentions of the sponsor's products. Hypotheses M2H1, M2H2, and M2H3 were therefore confirmed.



Model 1 (M1)



Model 2 (M2)

Figure 3. Standardized coefficients of the structural model (M1), and structural model (M2).

Note: Team identification (ICAEP – Identification Cognitive/Affective and Personal Evaluative, ICA = Cognitive/Affective Identification; IAP = Personal Evaluative Identification; IAO = Other Evaluative Identification,); Attitude - Attitude towards sponsoring company; PI = Purchase intention towards sponsor products; LM - Loyalty media.

Table 3. Structural equation model results - path estimates for the direct effects.

H	Hypotheses path estimate	Hypotheses	Standardized loadings (β)	Z (CR)
Model 1 (M1)				
M1H1.	Team identification → Attitude	Supported	.29***	13.06
M1H2.	Team identification → Purchase intention	Supported	.16***	8.23
M1H3.	Attitude → Purchase intention	Supported	.48***	23.66
	Variance explained (R^2)	29.7%		
Model 2 (M2)				
M2H1	Behavioral loyalty → Attitude	Supported	.46***	6.47
M2H2.	Behavioral loyalty → Purchase intention	Supported	.38***	5.29
M2H3	Attitude → Purchase intention	Supported	.35***	9.14
	Variance explained (R^2)	39.0%		

Notes: ns= non-significant; *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .05$

Table 4. Fit indices of the structural model (M1), and structural model (M2).

	χ^2	χ^2/df	CFI	PCFI	RMSEA	GFI	PGFI	TLI	SRMR
M1	1027.90	14.08	.955	.766	.070	.942	.655	.944	1.60
M2	1296.02	21.24	.941	.736	.087	.936	.627	.925	1.05

Discussion

The aim of this study was to determine which model (M1 or M2) has the greatest explanatory capacity for football fans' intention to buy products from the sponsoring company, by testing six hypotheses: 3 from M1 (M1H1, M1H2, M1H3) and 3 from M2 (M2H1, M2H2, M2H3).

The results showed that the conceptual model (M2), which incorporated the construct predicting fans' behavioral loyalty to the sports team, better explained the formation of the intention to buy the sponsoring company's products than the M1, which included the construct predicting fans' identification with the sports team. Fans' behavioral loyalty proved to be the most significant predictor of purchase intention regarding sponsor products. These results allow us to discuss the significance of behavior compared to the psychological dimension of team identification. It was the presence in the stadium attending home games and following team news through the media that played a more powerful role than identification with the team: "...see the team as a self-representation." (Branscombe & Wann, 1992, p. 1017). This was a more powerful predictor as it explained an additional 9.3% of the positive variance in purchase intention. Fans' actual behavior seems to have a stronger influence on the intention to buy the sponsoring company's products than the mere feeling of identification with the team.

This result can be explained by two factors:

The first may be linked to fans' physical presence in the stadium, which leads to direct exposure to informational stimuli and sponsors' activation actions. This exposure may have had a stronger impact on the formation of purchase intentions and the desire to buy the sponsoring company's products.

The second reason may be related to the stadium experience, in which fans, unlike when they are at home, are dressed – and sometimes even painted – in the team's colors, embracing each other and cheering for their favorite team. This creates a unique stadium atmosphere (Lee et al., 2017) that appears to have a greater effect on purchase intention than merely identifying with the team: "...perceive themselves as fans, are concerned with team's performance..." (Branscombe & Wann, 1992, p. 1017).

Conceptual Model 1 (M1) - Team identification

The conceptual model 1 (M1), whose predictor was team identification, explained 29.7 per cent of the formation of the intention to buy the sponsoring company's products ($R^2 = .29.7$). This implies that when the level of team identification increases by one point, purchase intention rises by .29.7 points. From a conceptual point of view, "the degree to which individuals perceive themselves as fans" (Branscombe & Wann, 1992) leads to an increased likelihood that these fans will purchase products from the companies that sponsor the teams they support.

According to Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which has been extensively employed to interpret the phenomenon of team identification, a central tenet holds that individuals typically form favorable evaluations of their in-group - namely, their sports team. The tendency to favor the in-group found in fans who strongly identify with their sports team can be extended to companies that support their favorite team through sponsorship (Silva, 2024). As a result, a significant positive direct effect of team identification on

attitude was observed ($\beta=.29$, $p<.001$). Although with a lower magnitude ($\beta=.16$, $p<.001$), team identification was also found to have a positive direct effect on purchase intention. A stronger effect was observed for attitude towards the sponsoring company, which had a direct impact on the intention to buy sponsors' products ($\beta = .48$, $p < .001$). This means that a positive and satisfactory attitude towards the sponsoring company (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003) is a strong indicator of purchase intention.

The results corroborate the view that fans often regard their team's sponsors as benevolent, paternalistic figures within the group dynamic. This finding confirms that team identification is a significant predictor of fans' reactions to sponsoring companies, both in terms of attitude towards the sponsor (Alexandris & Tsiotsou, 2012; Deitz et al., 2012; Jaber & Barkhordar, 2022; Kim et al., 2010; Koronios et al., 2016; Koronios et al., 2022; Parker & Fink, 2010; Deitz et al., 2012; Silva & Verissimo, 2020; Silva, 2024; Yagiz, 2023) and purchase intention (Dos-Santos et al., 2016; Kamath et al., 2020; Kim & Kim, 2018; Koo & Lee, 2019; Koronios et al., 2020; Koronios et al., 2021; Koronios et al., 2022; Moharana et al., 2023; Olson, 2010; Nguyen & Vu, 2022; Silva, 2024; Zaharia et al., 2016).

Conceptual Model 2 (M2) - Fan loyalty

The conceptual model 2 (M2), with the predictor being the behavioral loyalty of fans, explained 39% of the formation of the intention to purchase the sponsoring company's products ($R^2 = .39$). This means that when the level of behavioral loyalty among fans increases by one point, purchase intention rises by .39 points.

From a theoretical point of view, it was found that the construct of regularly following the team in the media and attending home games increases the attitude towards the sponsoring company, with a magnitude of .46 ($\beta=.46$, $p<.001$). In other words, the regular behavior of fans observed by attendance at home games and loyalty to the media acted positively and directly on the attitude towards the sponsoring company, increasing the Positive and Satisfactory evaluation about sponsor company.

The most relevant finding was the behavioral element associated with Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The number of home games attended and loyalty to following the team through media were identified as important predictors. Our study supports M2H2 ($\beta=.38$, $p<.001$). Only two studies (Koronios & Dimitropoulos, 2020; Silva, 2024) had observed these results in the context of football, and another study had even shown a negligible impact on purchase intentions (Smith et al., 2008).

It should also be noted that the effect of behavioral loyalty on purchase intention was .38 points ($\beta=.38$, $p<.001$), more than double the magnitude of the effect of team identification ($\beta=.16$, $p<.001$). This highlights the strong effect of fan behavior, particularly their loyalty to attending home games and consuming media content about the team, on purchase intention.

Additionally, in Model 2, the attitude towards the sponsoring company had a positive direct effect of significant magnitude ($\beta=.35$, $p<.001$). This result means that the more fans appreciate, value, and like the sponsoring companies, the more likely they are to purchase products from those companies in the near future.

Conclusion

Sponsorship of sports and professional football teams is a big business worldwide. Companies use sports sponsorship as a strategic tool to influence fan attitudes and drive sales, relying on the emotional transfer of fans' team passion to the sponsor and its products.

The results of this study confirmed this orientation, from which three conclusions can be drawn.

The first found that model 2 (M2), which included fans' behavioral loyalty, was more powerful in explaining fans' purchase intentions than model 1 (M1). Fans' behavioral loyalty towards the team, rather than their identification with the team, had the strongest influence on their attitude and purchase intention towards the sponsoring company.

The second is that in addition to passion, fan behavior must also be considered. An important advantage of sponsorship for a company is the opportunity to be associated with a sports team that has a fan base with behavioral loyalty.

The third is that the commitment of sponsorship can lie in the opportunity for the company to share stadium seats and media space and time with the sports team, as these factors play a crucial role in shaping fans' attitudes and behaviors — ultimately influencing the customer base of sponsoring companies.

Theoretical implications

The most significant finding of our study was the strong predictive effect of fan behavior. The regular behaviour of fans towards the team, in terms of the number of home games attended and the regularity of following the team through media, has been shown to significantly influence the intention to buy the sponsoring company's products. The current behavior of fans is a strong predictor of their future purchase intention. The construct of behavioral loyalty was shown to be a powerful determinant of fans' intention to buy the sponsoring company's products.

The second relevant finding was the magnitude of the direct predictive effect of fans' behavioral loyalty. The magnitude of the direct effects of behavioral loyalty on the intention to buy the sponsoring company's products is twice as high as the magnitude observed for the team identification predictor.

Managerial implications

These results carry important managerial implications for two key stakeholder groups: (1) managers of professional football teams and (2) managers of sponsoring companies' brands or products. For both, it is essential to understand the factors shaping fans' attitudes and behavioral intentions in order to maximize sponsorship effectiveness and overall value.

One practical application arises from the finding that fans' behavioral loyalty has a significant effect on the attitude towards the company and on their purchase intentions for the sponsoring companies' products. Therefore, managers of professional football teams can adopt strategies aimed at increasing fans' behavioral loyalty. More competitive season tickets, sets of tickets for less popular matches and rewards for fans who reach predefined levels of loyalty could be effective strategies.

It is recommended that managers of sponsoring firms invest in activation initiatives that take place at sporting venues and through media platforms regularly accessed by fans. These efforts should focus on enhancing fan loyalty, which has been shown to foster more favorable evaluations and stronger purchase intentions toward the sponsor's products.

Limitations and future research

Certain limitations of this study should be acknowledged. The sports team and sponsoring company used as stimuli were real brands with high levels of consumer awareness and familiarity. As noted by Roy (2010), this familiarity may have led participants to respond based on pre-existing knowledge or informational memory, rather than solely on the stimuli provided during the survey.

Forthcoming studies should compare different constructs and variables of behavioral loyalty, such as: 1) regular purchase of licensed club products, 2) regular use of clothing with the club's colors or logo, 3) number of matches attended per season away from home, 4) number of years of season ticket ownership, and even 5) number of years of club membership.

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