Drivers of soccer fan loyalty: Australian evidence on the influence of team brand image, fan engagement, satisfaction and enduring involvement

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1

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Abstract

Purpose The purpose of the paper is to contribute to the extant sport marketing literature by positing fan engagement, team brand image and cumulative fan satisfaction with the team as factors influencing attitudinal and behavioural soccer (football) fan loyalty, with enduring involvement with the team as a moderator.

Design/methodology/approach A convenience sample of Australian A-League soccer fans completed a paper-and-pencil, self-administered survey to evaluate their team on the focal constructs. A total of 207 participants were recruited from a major Australian east-coast university.

Findings Using partial least squares-structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM), the study found that fan engagement influences both team brand image and cumulative fan satisfaction, whilst team brand image also influences cumulative fan satisfaction, and both of these constructs influence attitudinal loyalty and behavioural loyalty. The moderating role of enduring involvement was also found for two relationships: team brand image $\rightarrow$ attitudinal loyalty and team brand image $\rightarrow$ behavioural loyalty, along with a mediating role of attitudinal loyalty.

Originality/value This study increases our understanding of the reasons why soccer fans are committed to and exhibit fan-related behaviours for a team, thus contributing to the sports-marketing literature on the relationships amongst fan engagement, team brand image, cumulative fan satisfaction, attitudinal loyalty and behavioural loyalty, along with the moderating role of enduring involvement. The findings also assist sports-marketing practitioners to formulate more effective, fan-centric marketing-communication strategies leading to a larger loyal fan base.

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2

Keywords Team brand image, Fan engagement, Satisfaction, Enduring involvement, Fan loyalty, Soccer, Football

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3

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1. Introduction

One of the most valuable assets a football (soccer) club has is its brand, and amongst a nation's most prominent brand symbols are the logos and team colours of its top football clubs. Therefore, brand-management issues, such as brand image (*How are we actually perceived?*), must be taken into consideration in club-management decisions (Holzmüller, Cramer and Thom, 2014). This practical brand-management imperative for soccer clubs dovetails with a current critical aspect of consumer research, which is the importance of understanding how consumers respond to brands, including such things as how brands are embedded in consumers' lives, consumer-to-consumer interaction (e.g. community engagement) and the role of a brand's history or heritage (Keller, 2020). These pressing questions inform this study as we look to shed light on drivers of soccer fan loyalty – namely, engagement, brand image and cumulative satisfaction – in an extremely competitive sport market where professional soccer (the A-League) is a struggling sport rather than an all-conquering titan.

Consumer brand engagement (CBE) is an important strategic factor for building firms' competitive advantage (Nysveen and Pedersen, 2014), thus making it a market research priority (MSI, 2018). CBE is a multidimensional concept that reflects an emotional state that involves consumers' passion for a brand (Brodie *et al.,* 2011; Brodie *et al.,* 2013) and is characterised by a level of active immersion and passion (France *et al.,* 2018; Hollebeek, 2011), which is a natural fit with the passion that soccer fans exhibit for their team (Lynch, 2019) that is the focus of this study. Therefore, understanding the influence of CBE upon

brand perceptions – brand image in this study – for soccer fans can provide important insights (France *et al.,* 2018; Keller, 2020; Manoli, 2018).

Brand image refers to the set of associations attached to the brand in consumers' memory, reflecting how the brand is perceived in the mind of consumers (Keller, 1993). As consumers consider brands with a strong and favourable brand image as a primary option in their decision-making process, brand image can influence customer satisfaction and contribute to future profits and on-going brand loyalty (Cheung *et al.*, 2020; Da Silva and Alwi, 2008; Hart and Rosenberger, 2004; Richard and Zhang, 2012). Given branding's vital importance for professional sport teams to generate long-term benefits (Blumrodt and Huang-Horowitz, 2017; Holzmüller *et al.*, 2014), there has been growing interest in investigating sport team brand equity (e.g. Biscaia *et al.,* 2016; Hattula, 2018; Parganas *et al.,* 2017; Wang and Tang, 2018), for which team brand image is a vital component (Bauer, Stokburger-Sauer, and Exler, 2008; Shuv-Ami *et al.,* 2018). Sport-branding research has focused primarily on the European and US markets (Wang and Tang, 2018), thus, a theoretical gap exists in understanding the role that fan engagement and team brand image have for fan satisfaction and fan loyalty (Leckie *et al.,* 2016), particularly in a highly competitive sports market where the A-League in Australia struggles in both ratings and attendance (Bossi, 2017).

In Australia and other Western countries, many sports fans attend soccer matches as their major leisure activity (Wang and Tang, 2018). In addition to alternative leisure options, professional sport organisations find it increasingly challenging to attract and retain a robust loyal fan base. Whilst soccer has a long history in Australia, the sport has struggled to secure the domestic popularity of rival football codes. Amongst the four Australian football codes — Australian Rules (AFL), Rugby League (NRL), Rugby Union (Super Rugby) and soccer (A-League)—are leaders in terms of participation and spectatorship (Nauright, 2018). It was just 15 years ago that the A-League emerged from the side-lines to occupy a major place in

Australian sport. Despite early success, Australian soccer has experienced year-over-year declines in regular season average attendance, gate receipts and TV viewership in the recent past (Bossi, 2017; Rugari, 2019a). Seeking to stimulate Australian soccer after years of stagnation, the A-League owners negotiated a split from the Football Federation Australia (FFA) and adopted a business model more in line with major European competitions. The FFA relinquished control of the strategic and commercial direction of the A-League, and effectively embraced a new role as a challenger brand. The move seeks to reinvigorate Australia's professional domestic competition, differentiate the A-League from the other Australian football codes and align and unite Australian football interests, along with growing the awareness and popularity of the game (Rugari, 2019b).

In spite of the A-League's struggles as well as soccer's positioning in the competitive domestic sports market (Lock and Filo, 2012), there has been limited research in understanding what contributes to fan loyalty for Australian professional soccer teams, which is the starting point for this study (Kunkel and Funk, 2014). Given soccer's practical problem (i.e. game attendance), paying attention to less involved A-League fans is also important by investigating the moderating role of enduring involvement. To examine these issues, the following research questions (RQs) were developed:

RQ1: *What effect does fan engagement have on team brand image and cumulative fan satisfaction?*

RQ2: *What effect does team brand image have on cumulative fan satisfaction and fan loyalty?*

RQ3: *What effect does cumulative fan satisfaction have on fan loyalty?*

RQ4: *Does enduring involvement moderate the relationships amongst fan engagement, team brand image, cumulative fan satisfaction and fan loyalty?*

To address the RQs, we next draw upon the sports marketing, CBE and branding literature to present a theoretical framework (see Figure 1) that contributes to the extant sport marketing literature by positing fan engagement (FE), team brand image (TBI) and cumulative fan satisfaction (CFS) with the team as factors influencing attitudinal and behavioural A-League fan loyalty, with enduring involvement as a moderator. We then describe the methodology used, present the results and discussion and note the study's limitations.

Insert Figure I.
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2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Fan loyalty

Behavioural loyalty represents the repeated purchase and consumption of the same product or service over time (Wang *et al.,* 2011), such as attending games and purchasing team merchandise (Bauer *et al.,* 2008; Mahony *et al.,* 2000; Worthington *et al.,* 2010). Many sports-fan studies focus on behavioural loyalty only (e.g. Biscaia *et al.,* 2016; Moital et al., 2019; Theodorakis *et al.,* 2013; Yoshida *et al.,* 2014). However, fan loyalty requires an examination beyond behavioural traits by also involving the attitudinal component of loyalty (e.g. Cifci and Erdogan, 2016; Kang, 2017; Maderer and Holtbrügge, 2018; Rosenberger *et al*., 2019; Wang *et al*., 2011; Yoon *et al.,* 2017). Therefore, this study considers both attitudinal loyalty and behavioural loyalty.

Attitudinal loyalty comprises the inner relatedness of fans to their team and distinguishes between spurious and 'true' fan loyalty (Bauer *et al.,* 2008), providing sport marketers specific and useful sport-consumer information essential to attracting and retaining a fan base in an increasingly crowded sports market (Biscaia *et al.,* 2017). Attitudinal loyalty reflects the degree of attachment (Park and Kim, 2000) or commitment of a fan to a team

4

(Bauer *et al.,* 2008; Funk and James, 2001, 2006; Tsiotsou, 2013a), tapping into resistance to change (Heere and Dickson, 2008). Attitudinal loyalty features three hallmarks – persistence of one's attitude towards a team over time, resistance to change his/her connection towards the team and biased processing of team-related information (Wang *et al*., 2011). In sum, attitudinal loyalty is a result of the interaction between negative external changes and the internal psychological connection, i.e. the willingness of a fan to maintain their commitment to the team (Tachis and Tzetzis, 2015; Tzetzis and Tachis, 2013).

2.2 CBE (fan engagement)

CBE involves consumers' passion for the brand, arising from the strength of the consumer-brand relationship (Brodie *et al.,* 2011; Leckie *et al.,* 2016). Of particular interest for this study is the important role of the consumer in constructing both the brand experience and the brand meaning for hedonic brands (Merrilees, 2016), such as professional soccer. CBE can be seen to consist of a set of brand-related interactions beyond financial transactions that features sharing and exchanging ideas, thoughts and feelings about experiences with the brand with other customers of the brand (Huerta-Álvarez *et al*., 2020), which is reflected in the sports-marketing literature (Vale and Fernandes, 2018; Yoshida *et al.,* 2014). CBE represents an individual's psychologically based willingness to invest in the undertaking of focal interactions with particular engagement objects (e.g. a brand or firm), often beyond purchase (Hollebeek *et al*., 2016), with this view the general agreement resulting from recent customer engagement research (Dessart, 2017).

Following Dessart (2017), we adopt the perspective of fan engagement being "the state that reflects consumers' positive individual dispositions towards the community and the focal brand as expressed through varying levels of affective, cognitive and behavioural manifestations that go beyond exchange situations" (p. 377). In this view, interactivity

5

between customers and a company acts as the core of the engagement construct (Brodie *et al.,* 2011; Van Doorn, 2010), with an important consideration being the duality of engagement in comprising community engagement – i.e. representing the other consumers in the group, such as other fans in this study – and brand engagement (Dessart, 2017; Dessart *et al.*, 2016). Sports fans engage to share their experiences and opinions about their team. Thus, sharing and a spirit of community are part of the sports product and co-creating its meaning (Parganas *et al.*, 2017).

In the broader engagement literature, there is a lack of agreement about engagement in its role as either an antecedent or consequent to satisfaction and brand-related constructs, e.g. brand image, brand associations, brand equity and brand trust. For example, some scholars view engagement as a driver of satisfaction (e.g. Achen, 2016; Carvalho and Fernandes 2018; Gummerus *et al.,* 2012) and brand-related constructs (Barger *et al.*, 2016; Carvalho and Fernandes 2018; Cheung *et al.*, 2020b; Dessart, 2017), yet other scholars argue that satisfaction and brand-related constructs are better considered as an antecedent of engagement behaviours (Brodie *et al.,* 2013; Pansari and Kumar, 2017; van Doorn *et al.*, 2010). Equally, Hollebeek (2011) theorised that satisfaction and brand-related outcomes (e.g. brand trust) could be either an antecedent to CBE or an outcome of CBE. Against this discordant theoretical CBE backdrop, we argue that support exists in the literature for engagement as an antecedent to satisfaction and brand-related constructs (e.g. Carvalho and Fernandes 2018; Cheung *et al.*, 2020; Dessart, 2017; Kumar and Nayak, 2018). For example, in the social-media context and the importance of second-screen phenomenon (i.e. live sporting telecasts on Facebook), CBE was modelled as antecedent to satisfaction (Phonthanukitithaworn and Sellitto, 2017). We thus adopt this theoretical perspective for this study.

Empirical evidence supports CBE's influence on brand-related outcomes, including brand image, brand attitude, brand trust, brand community, emotional bonds, brand co-creation behaviour and brand evaluations (e.g. Brodie *et al.,* 2013; Carvalho and Fernandes, 2018; Dessart, 2017; France *et al.,* 2018; Hollebeek and Chen, 2014; Hollebeek *et al.,* 2014; Pradhan *et al.,* 2020; Vivek *et al.,* 2012; Wong and Merrilees, 2015). The interaction between consumers and brands incurred during the process of building CBE is an input in the formation of brand image (Cheung *et al*., 2020), as engaging with consumers increases a brand's visibility and improves its brand image (Achen, 2016). In their study of 60 brands, Schivinski and Dabrowski (2016) found that user-generated social media communication – a form of CBE (Šerić and Praničević, 2018) – had a positive influence on both brand equity and brand attitude. Therefore, increases in CBE can help in strengthening consumers' cognitive understanding of a product's attributes and brand benefits (Brodie *et al.,* 2011) and a stronger brand image (Cheung *et al*., 2020b). For example, in their study of NCAA Championship (collegiate) sports events, Walsh *et al*. (2013) found that event fans of the event Facebook pages gave the brand attributes higher ratings than did non-fans. Thus, FE is posited in this study as being an antecedent to team brand image.

Satisfaction measures the consumer's reaction to consumption, and consumption is antecedent to the evaluation (satisfaction), which includes engagement with the brand (Maslowska *et al*., 2016). Consumer satisfaction is positively influenced by customers' affective responses, such as their enjoyment, excitement and pleasure of product consumption, and these may be experienced due to customer engagement (Gummerus *et al*., 2012). This mechanism may work through the raising and lowering of expectations, with Shi *et al*. (2016) finding that positive or negative WOM (including online and offline) affects customer satisfaction by promoting or lowering customers' expectations.

Empirical evidence supports CBE's influence on cumulative satisfaction (Gummerus *et al.*, 2012). For example, Carvalho and Fernandes' (2018) study of 283 different brands found CBE to have a strong, positive influence on cumulative satisfaction. In the sports-fan context, empirical research has established FE's positive influence on cumulative fan satisfaction (Achen, 2016; Phonthanukitithaworn and Sellitto, 2017). Arguably, engaged soccer fans are satisfied with the team brand and its experience (Carvalho and Fernandes, 2018).

Given the preceding discussion, this leads to the following hypotheses:

H1: Fan engagement will have a positive influence on team brand image.

H2: Fan engagement will have a positive influence on cumulative fan satisfaction.

2.3 Team Brand Image

Team brand image (TBI) represents one of the few constants in fans' perceptions that sports marketers can directly influence (Bauer *et al.,* 2008). Therefore, a team's brand image should be considered in sports-marketing research, given the essential role it plays in building a stable and loyal fan base (Biscaia *et al.,* 2016; Holzmüller *et al.*, 2014).

Team brand image is the cumulative product of brand associations in the sport consumer's mind (e.g. Keller, 1993; Gladden and Funk, 2001, 2002; Ross *et al.,* 2006), such as product-related (e.g. coach, success, star players) and non-product-related attributes (e.g. logo & colours, club history & tradition, modern stadium, fans) (Parganas *et al.,* 2017; Shuv-Ami *et al.,* 2018). Brand image is also a necessary component to be competitive to drive stronger brand loyalty (Kim *et al.,* 2018). Thus, a team's brand image can play a pivotal role in fostering loyal fan behaviours (Bauer *et al.,* 2008; Bauer *et al.,* 2005; Biscaia *et al.,* 2013; Biscaia *et al.,* 2016; Blumrodt *et al.,* 2012). Equally, a strong brand image can be beneficial for a sports club's on-field performance (Hattula, 2018).

Although product-related attributes (e.g. coach, success and star players) contribute to actual team performance, there should be a stronger focus on establishing a strong brand identity using non-product-related attributes (e.g. logo & colours, club history & tradition, modern stadium, and fans) for their relative consistency and stability over time (Bauer *et al.*, 2005, 2008). For example, as former EPL (English Premier League) chief advising the A-League, Richard Scudamore, noted: "It's not all about marquee players or whatever, … Players come and go, you can be a fan of a club a lot longer than a player can play for a club" (Lynch, 2019). Supporting this view, Bodet and Chanavat (2010) found that a strong brand image merely comprised of players and coaches' image did not provide enough explanation to be competitive in foreign markets. Whilst product attributes are known as internal aspects affecting the overall performance of the product or service, non-product attributes are known as external aspects that do not influence the overall performance. To illustrate, most fans have cumulative experiences with their team performance of ups and downs including major changes of coaches and players. Thus, external factors (i.e. the stadium, club history and tradition) should have a greater relevance to the fans since they neither consider team success nor the star players to be a central part in perceiving team image (Bauer *et al.*, 2008).

For example, Couvelaere and Richelieu (2005) identified the importance of various non-product attributes for the French soccer clubs in their study, whilst Blumrodt and Huang-Horowitz (2017) found French soccer clubs communicated non-product brand attributes as part of their web-based-communication efforts. In their study of sports team heritage, Rose *et al.* (2020) identified the symbols associated with a team – such as its colours, logo and mascot – as a significant dimension, one which was positively correlated with attitude towards the team, sponsorship and sponsor brand. In their study of the online engagement of English and Greek fans of Liverpool FC in the EPL, Parganas *et al.* (2017) found that non-product-related posts related to the team's history and tradition and its fans were the third and fourth-most

9

interacted with posts on Facebook and Twitter. In arresting a period of financial crisis, Borussia Dortmund (BVB) in the German Bundesliga undertook a brand overhaul designed to activate the dormant energy in the brand. Key considerations revolved around the club's brand image, including updating the logo to leverage the club colours, Black-Yellow – unique to BVB – which are the visible expression of the club's identity and thus enables the club to capture the imagination of its fans, along with linking in to the club's history/tradition in the region (Holzmüller *et al*., 2014).

A team's stadium and its environment aid fan engagement and connection through providing both a literal and a spiritual home where rituals and traditions are practiced, which helps the home team with crowd support (Rose *et al*., 2020). Thus, for fans attending games, the stadium can play a sizeable role in the creation of positive associations with a constant future attendance (Biscaia *et al.,* 2013; Hattula, 2018; Kaynak *et al.,* 2008). For example, Kunkel *et al*. (2014) highlighted the importance of the stadium as well as the A-League match-day experience. In support of this, former EPL chief Scudamore also reiterated the need for the A-League to play in the right venues able to accommodate the average crowds instead of in virtually empty, cavernous stadiums that often impose crippling charges on tenants (Lynch, 2019). Blumrodt *et al*. (2012) found that not only were non-product -related attributes the main part of some French soccer clubs' TBI perceptions, but that the stadium component of TBI also had a positive influence on behavioural fan loyalty. Equally, soccer clubs not owning their stadium (which is the case in the A-League) was found to be a branding constraint by Couvelaere and Richelieu (2005).

The club's history and tradition is part of its brand heritage (Urde *et al*., 2007). Brand heritage invokes a brand's past (or elements thereof) and may be useful in differentiating and positioning offers, along with facilitating brand attachment and commitment and impacting purchase intentions (Rose *et al*., 2106). Recent sports-marketing research shows that invoking

sports team heritage can generate positive attitudes towards the sports team, sponsorship and the sponsoring brand (Rose *et al.*, 2020).

Thus, a brand-image focus can enable a club to increase the financial or commercial value flowing from the brand image (Keller, 1993) and, subsequently, economic success (Bauer *et al.*, 2005; Holzmüller *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, clubs focusing on TBI could lead to fans' willingness to pay more attention to well branded teams.

TBI has also been shown to affect CFS with the team (Beccarini and Ferrand, 2006; Biscaia *et al.,* 2013), as brand image can support or undermine the evaluative judgements that fans make on what they believe they are getting from the club (Beccarini and Ferrand, 2006). Equally, not only does TBI affect satisfaction with the club, but also it has direct influences on attitudinal loyalty or behavioural loyalty (Blumrodt *et al.*, 2012; Kaynak *et al.*, 2008; Liu *et al.,* 2019). For example, the brand equity of individual athletes was found to have positive influences on both event satisfaction and behavioural intentions (Park *et al.,* 2019). Brand equity dimensions – including brand awareness, personality and perceived value/quality – have also been found to significantly influence brand loyalty (Su, 2016). Meanwhile, for high-market-share teams, fans endorsing stronger brand associations show greater levels of attitudinal loyalty than do fans of low-market-share team (Doyle *et al.*, 2013). Accordingly, soccer fans who strongly, positively and uniquely associate non-product-related attributes are more likely to be satisfied with their favourite club, as they regard the club's (1) logo and colours, (2) history and tradition, (3) modern stadium and (4) fans as being important to fan loyalty (Bauer *et al.*, 2005).

This leads to the following hypotheses:

H3: Team brand image will have a positive influence on cumulative fan satisfaction.

H4: Team brand image will have a positive influence on attitudinal loyalty.

H5: Team brand image will have a positive influence on behavioural loyalty.

2.4 Cumulative Fan Satisfaction

Two distinctive conceptualisations of customer satisfaction have evolved (Johnson, 2001): transaction-specific satisfaction and cumulative satisfaction (Anderson *et al.,* 1994). The former is about the immediate post-purchase evaluation of individuals' experience with and reactions to a specific purchase (Matsuoka *et al.,* 2003), whilst the latter is "an overall evaluation based on the total purchase and consumption experience with a good or service over time" (Anderson *et al.,* 1994, p. 54). Conceptualising satisfaction as the outcome of one single transaction may be too restrictive when examining the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty, as loyalty needs to be measured over time (Olsen, 2007; Olsen and Johnson, 2003; Chan *et al.,* 2016), especially for sports fans (Heere and Dickson, 2008; Tapp, 2004). Therefore, the cumulative view is appropriate for satisfaction with a sports team (Beccarini and Ferrand, 2006), as fans can use their entire experience over time (Biscaia *et al.,* 2017; Johnson *et al.,* 1995). On this basis, CFS was used in this study.

Satisfaction's relationship to loyalty is well documented (Anderson *et al.,* 1994; Bodet, 2008; Brunner *et al.,* 2008; Kumar *et al*., 2013; Vera-Martinez and Ornelas, 2019), where cumulative satisfaction is antecedent to loyalty (Oliver, 1999). We argue that CFS is the better predictor of loyalty than transaction-specific satisfaction (Bodet, 2008; Koenigstorfer *et al*., 2010; Olsen and Johnson, 2003) for the sports context, where research has found cumulative satisfaction to be positively related to attitudinal and behavioural fan loyalty (Biscaia *et al*., 2012; Biscaia *et al*., 2017; Clemes *et al*., 2011; Gray and Wert-Gray, 2012). On this basis, we argue that A-League fans who are cumulatively satisfied with their team will be more likely to be both attitudinally and behaviourally loyal to their team, thus:

H6: Cumulative fan satisfaction with the team will have a positive influence on attitudinal loyalty.

H7: Cumulative fan satisfaction with the team will have a positive influence on behavioural loyalty.

2.5 Enduring Involvement

Involvement is "a person's perceived relevance of an object based on inherent needs, values and interests" (Zaichkowsky, 1985, p. 342) and is useful in providing a better understanding of sport-consumer attitudes and behaviours (Kunkel *et al.,* 2013). We focus on enduring involvement (EI), which is the extent to which a focal object/activity is viewed by an individual as a central, significant and engaging part of their life (O'Cass, 2000; Zaichkowsky, 1985). In short, EI represents an ongoing interest in an object (Havitz and Howard, 1995).

We focus on EI with the team due to its ongoing nature, as fans can be involved with a football team (Kunkel *et al.,* 2013), and EI fans constantly pay attention to their supported team (Stevens and Rosenberger, 2012). EI can affect CBE (Dessart, 2017) and has been positively associated with advertising effectiveness, including brand recognition and free ad recall (Tsiotsou, 2013b). It has also been associated with the level of satisfaction of a special event (Bojanic and Warnick, 2012). In sports-marketing contexts, EI has been found to positively drive purchase intention of sponsor products via sponsor image (Bachleda *et al.,* 2016) as well as fan loyalty (Kunkel *et al*., 2013; Stevens and Rosenberger, 2012). Empirical research has also found that EI moderates the relationship between online user-generated content (a type of CBE) and brand associations (Cheung *et al*., 2020a). Involvement has also been identified as a moderator of the satisfaction → loyalty relationship in general (Kumar *et al*., 2013; Seiders *et al*., 2005).

Given the highly competitive multi-code football environment that Australian soccer operates in, where a range of soccer fans is expected to exist with low to elevated levels of EI

with the team, understanding how EI with a football team moderates the conceptual-model

relationships would be of interest for marketing managers (Kunkel *et al.*, 2013; Kunkel *et al.*,

2017). To this end, we evaluate the moderation effect of EI, as the importance of moderators

arises from their ability to enhance understanding of the relationship between relevant

independent variables and dependent variables (Walsh *et al.*, 2008). Given the greater

centrality and importance the team should have for those high in EI, the general expectation

would be that many of the relationships in the model should be stronger than for those low in

EI. For example, high EI fans are more likely to pay greater attention to, and exert more effort

in, processing personally relevant information and engage with the team and the community

of fans through interacting with the team to stay up-to-date and discussing events and

happenings with others (Park *et al.*, 2007). High-EI fans are thus more likely to invest more

time and attention in interacting with peers on social-media brand communities, leading to a

stronger influence of FE on CFS (Cheung *et al.*, 2020a). Equally, high-EI fans are also likely

to form stronger held or higher committed attitudes towards their team that are more resistant

to persuasion or change, i.e. they are likely to remain attitudinally loyal than low EI fans

(Bloch *et al.*, 1986; Smith and Gallicano, 2015; Stevens and Rosenberger, 2012;

Zaichkowsky, 1985).

However, it is also conceivable that some relationships may be stronger for those

lower in enduring involvement. For example, for those who are lower in EI, team brand image

could conceivably have a larger influence on attitudinal and behavioural loyalty compared to

those higher in EI. Equally, the influence of CFS on BL may be weaker for the low-EI group.

The high-EI group would conceivably feature more 'die-hard supporters' compared to the

greater potential for more 'fair-weather fans' to feature amongst low-EI group (Ware and

Kowalski, 2012). Therefore, EI is used as a moderator in this research, which leads to the

following hypothesis:

H8: Enduring involvement with the team will moderate the relationships in the conceptual model.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data collection

The purpose of this study is to build theory that helps explain relationships that occur in a real-world situation (i.e. theory application), rather than generalising effects to a specific population (Calder *et al.,* 1981). Therefore, a convenience sample of 207 Australian A-League soccer fans completed a paper-and-pencil, self-administered survey to evaluate their A-League soccer team on the focal constructs.

Participants were recruited from a major Australian east-coast university. Using the central-location survey method, respondents were approached at a variety of campus locations on different days and times throughout the week to ensure a cross-section of the sample frame was accessed. Potential respondents were explained the purpose of the research, that participation was voluntary and that it had received institutional ethics clearance. Further, respondents were offered a small incentive (i.e. a small sweet) for completing the survey as a measure of gratitude for their time and effort.

There were 240 individuals approached, with 29 declining to participate, resulting in a participation rate of 88% for the 211 surveys received. The completed surveys were then checked for incomplete responses, with four unusable surveys discarded. This resulted in 207 usable surveys, which formed the final sample for data analysis.

The advantages of using a homogenous group of respondents—such as university students—is that it allows for more precise theory building compared to a heterogeneous sample (Calder *et al.,* 1981, Stevens, 2011), such as this study. A university-student sample is suitable when the theoretical scope—the conceptualisation—is more universalistic, as in this

study, where the relationships are presumed to hold regardless of the population, rather than being more context specific (Stevens, 2011). Further, the greater variability associated with a heterogeneous sample makes the theoretical assumptions more difficult to assess and constitutes a threat to statistical-conclusion validity (Calder *et al*., 1981).

The students in this sample are also A-League fans, and as detailed in section 3.4, are regular consumers of the product, as reflected in games attended and watched on TV and owning items of team merchandise. A research sample need only allow a test of the theory, and any sample within the theory's domain, not just a representative one, can provide such a test (Calder *et al*., 1981). For example, business research comparing students and managers has found that a student sample replicates the results from a manager sample to the expected degree (Bolton, Ockenfels and Thonemann, 2012; Graf-Vlachy, 2019). Furthermore, past fan-loyalty studies have used relevant-student samples (Dwyer, Greenhalgh, and LeCrom, 2015). Therefore, the use of a homogenous, convenience-based sample (such as university students) of A-League fans is appropriate for the purpose of this research.

3.2 Measures

Consistent with prior sports-brand research (Kunkel *et al.,* 2016; Kunkel *et al.,* 2017), and following Diamantopoulos *et al*. (2008) and Jarvis, Mackensie and Podsakoff (2003), team brand image (TBI) was conceptualised as a second-order, Type II reflective-formative hierarchical construct (HOC). Twelve items (Bauer *et al.,* 2008) tapped four non-product-related, brand-attribute dimensions for TBI (3 items each): logo & colours, club history & tradition, modern stadium, and fans, with each dimension measured on its strength (1 = do not associate at all, 7 = strongly associate), favourability (1 = extremely negative, 7 = extremely positive) and uniqueness (1 = not unique at all, 7 = extremely unique). Following Dessart's (2017) community- and brand-engagement perspective, fan engagement (FE) was

operationalised as a second-order, Type 1 reflective-reflective HOC tapping community engagement (4 items) and brand engagement (2 items) dimensions (Jahn and Kunz, 2012; Stevens and Rosenberger, 2012) and measured on a 7-point, Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Cumulative fan satisfaction (CFS) used 5 items measured on an 11-point scale (Clemes *et al.,* 2011; McDonald *et al.,* 2013; 0 = very dissatisfied, 10 = very satisfied). Attitudinal loyalty (AL, 4 items) was measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = not at all descriptive of me; 7 = very descriptive of me), with behavioural loyalty (BL, 3 items) measured by home-game and away-game attendance (both 6-point) and the pieces of club merchandise owned (4-point) (Gladden and Funk, 2001; Stevens and Rosenberger, 2012; Wang *et al*., 2011). Enduring involvement (EI, 6 items) was measured on a 7-point semantic-differential scale (Higie and Feick, 1989).

3.3 Analysis

Analysis used Partial Least Squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM), SmartPLS v3.2.9 (Ringle *et al.,* 2015). PLS-SEM is appropriate for prediction-based research (Fornell and Bookstein, 1982), such as predicting what drives soccer fans to be attitudinally loyal to a team and exhibit fan-related behaviours. PLS-SEM is also suitable for models featuring reflective- and formative-constructed models (Hair *et al*., 2017), as in this study.

Using a two-step procedure, the measurement model was first assessed and then the structural model featuring a bootstrapping procedure of 5000 cases. The repeated-indicator approach was used for the two HOCs (Becker *et al*., 2012; Hair *et al.,* 2017), which involves the indicators of the first-order constructs being repeated to measure the second-order construct.

A two-stage, sequential, LVS (latent variable score) approach following recommended guidelines was used to evaluate the structural paths for the hypothesis testing

due to the reflective-formative nature of TBI as an endogenous (target) variable (Becker *et al.*, 2012; Hair *et al.*, 2017; Wetzels *et al.*, 2009). As with other studies using this approach (e.g. Hernaus and Mikulić, 2014; Malik *et al.*, 2016), this involved estimating the outer model (i.e. measurement model) for all first-order constructs in the first stage. In the second stage, the resulting LVS values for the lower-order TBI constructs were then used as manifest formative indicators for the higher order TBI construct to correctly estimate the inner model (i.e. structural model) and the exogenous construct influences on our higher order, TBI construct.

To explore enduring involvement's moderation effects, a median scale split was used to create low (n = 99) and high (n = 108) EI groups. PLS multiple group analysis (PLS-MGA) was then used featuring 5,000 bootstrap samples (Hair *et al.*, 2017).

3.4 Sample profile

Respondents were fans who followed an A-League team, with the Newcastle Jets (60%) being the most followed A-League team, followed by the Central Coast Mariners (21%), Sydney FC (11%) and the Melbourne Victory (7%). Eighty-four per cent of participants had attended at least one home game, thirty per cent had attended two to four games and one in five respondents (20%) had attended 5+ games. Away-game attendance was lower, with nearly half of the respondents attending at least one away-game. Most all of the participants (94%) watched A-League games on TV (mean = 6-10 games) and eight in ten (81%) owned team merchandise.

In terms of demographics, the sample was mostly male (80%), with an average age of 21 years old (range = 18 to 30). The sample represented a wide range of majors: business/commerce and law (14%), education and arts (14%), engineering (31%), health and medicine (17%), science and IT (17%) and language and foundation studies (6%). Regarding their nationality, the vast majority (93%) were Australian.

4. Results

4.1 Measurement model evaluation

The adequacy and significance of the measurement model was assessed by examining the item loadings (all > .70, $p < .001$), Cronbach's α (> .70), composite reliability (> .70), average variance extracted (AVE > .50), collinearity (inner-model VIFs < 4.0 for stage 1 and < 2.0 for stage 2) and discriminant validity (Fornell-Larcker and HTMT) for the first-order constructs, with all the results satisfying the recommended benchmarks (Hair *et al.,* 2017). (See Table I and Table II.) Regarding discriminant validity, for the Fornell-Larcker criterion, the square root of the AVE was greater than the correlations with other constructs (see Table III), and the items loaded more strongly on the relevant construct. Furthermore, the loadings of the first-order dimensions for TBI and FE on the respective HOCs were significant ($p < .001$). The formative criteria for TBI were also satisfied (Hair *et al*., 2017). Lastly, EI also satisfied the various criteria for item loadings (> .75, $p < .001$), Cronbach's α (.90), composite reliability (.92) and AVE (.67).

Insert Table I. Table II. Table III.

4.2 Structural model evaluation

To test the structural model, we analysed the size and the significance of the path-coefficients using the full sample ($n = 207$). In PLS, the explanatory power of the final (second stage) model is represented by the R^2 values for the endogenous constructs in the model (Hair *et al*., 2012). Some scholars suggest that the recommended R^2 benchmark and AVA (average variance accounted for) should exceed 0.10 (cf. Falk and Miller, 1992; Chin, 1998), whilst a value of 0.20 is considered high for consumer-behaviour studies (Vock *et al*., 2013). As presented in Table IV and Figure II, for the full sample, the model explains 37% of the

variation in team brand image, 36% of cumulative fan satisfaction, 48% of attitudinal loyalty and 30% of behavioural loyalty, with the AVA = 0.38. Therefore, the explanatory ability of the model exceeds the 0.10 criterion, as well as achieving the higher 0.20 threshold. In sum, all the results substantiate the conceptualised model. To control for fan (respondent) heterogeneity, age and gender were included in the model, with no meaningful effects of the independent variables on the dependent variables changing with their inclusion in the model compared to their exclusion.

Figure II and Table IV present the conceptual model and PLS results, featuring the standardised Beta (β) weights and respective significance (one-tailed tests used). As posited in the conceptual model, fan engagement influences both team brand image and cumulative fan satisfaction, team brand image also influences cumulative fan satisfaction, and both constructs influence attitudinal loyalty and behavioural loyalty. Therefore, H1 (FE → TBI, $\beta = 0.61$, $t = 15.026$, $p < 0.001$), H2 (FE → CFS, $\beta = 0.33$, $t = 4.263$, $p < 0.001$), H3 (TBI → CFS, $\beta = 0.34$, $t = 3.714$, $p < 0.001$), H4 (TBI → AL, $\beta = 0.44$, $t = 6.171$, $p < 0.001$), H5 (TBI → BL, $\beta = 0.36$, $t = 4.808$, $p < 0.001$), H6 (CFS → AL, $\beta = 0.26$, $t = 3.4337$, $p < 0.001$) and H7 (CFS → BL, $\beta = 0.17$, $t = 2.075$, $p < 0.05$) are all supported.

Regarding the EI moderation effect posited in H8, the PLS-MGA analysis (Table IV) identified a significant difference ($p < .05$) between the low/high EI groups for one path: TBI → AL. A marginal difference ($p < .10$) was also found for one path: TBI → BL. Specifically, the influence of TBI on AL was found to be significantly greater ($p < .05$) for the low-EI group ($\beta = 0.51$) than for the high-EI group ($\beta = .22$). In contrast, the marginally significant ($p < .10$) influence of TBI on BL was found to be greater for the high-EI group ($\beta = 0.39$) than for the low-EI group ($\beta = 0.15$); therefore, H8 is partially supported.

Insert Figure II. Table IV.

20

4.3 Alternative model evaluation

The study also explores an alternative model evaluation (see Figure III) to assess the relationship between attitudinal loyalty and behavioural loyalty and the potential for attitudinal loyalty to have a mediating influence. Attitudinal loyalty can be an antecedent to behavioural loyalty (Bauer *et al.,* 2008; Hollebeek, 2011), for example, positively impacting behavioural manifestations, such as willingness to pay (Jaiswal and Niraj, 2011). Therefore, attitudinally loyal fans would be more likely to purchase merchandise related to their team and attend matches.

Next, the literature supports attitudinal loyalty mediating the satisfaction → behavioural loyalty relationship (Jaiswal and Rakesh, 2011; Russell-Bennett *et al*., 2007). When consumers have a positive attitude towards the firm or are satisfied with the product and service, they indirectly translate this into attitudinal and behavioural loyalty (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001). An example includes the mediating effect of attitudinal loyalty on the relationship between service quality and behavioural loyalty in a leisure context, where attitudinal loyalty was found to mediate the relationship between service attributes (e.g. emotion and ambiance) and return patronage for a casino (Bilgihan *et al.,* 2016). The literature also supports attitudinal loyalty being a potential mediator of brand-evaluations, such as brand affect (Soedarto *et al.*, 2019). Accordingly, when fans consider TBI non-product-related attributes to be important, their behavioural intentions would be salient via attitudinal loyalty.

The alternative model analysis (see Figure III) shows the FE → CFS, FE → TBI, TBI → CFS and TBI → AL paths as unchanged, with CFS → AL showing a minor drop (from 0.26 to 0.25). The new AL → BL path was positive and significant ($\beta = 0.43$, $t = 7.05$, $p < 0.001$). In contrast with the original model, the CFS → BL relationship in the alternative model more than halved to become non-significant ($\beta = 0.06$, $t = 0.83$, $p = .21$) whilst the TBI

$\rightarrow$ BL relationship also halved, albeit still remaining significant ($\beta = 0.17$, $t = 2.40$, $p < 0.01$). The explanatory ability of the alternative model is unchanged for TBI ($R^2 = .37$), CFS ($R^2 = .36$) and AL ($R^2 = .48$), whilst noticeably increasing for BL ($R^2 = .40$), with the AVA increasing slightly $= 0.40$.

Next, we used the recommended mediation-testing procedure (Hair *et al.*, 2017; Zhao *et al.*, 2010) to assess AL's influence on the CFS $\rightarrow$ BL and TBI $\rightarrow$ BL relationships. This confirmed the presence of mediation effects. Specifically, the indirect CFS $\rightarrow$ AL $\rightarrow$ BL effect was positive and significant ($\beta = 0.11$, $t = 3.09$, $p < 0.001$), and when combined with the non-significant CFS $\rightarrow$ BL path, this shows AL fully mediates the CFS $\rightarrow$ BL relationship. Next, the indirect TBI $\rightarrow$ AL $\rightarrow$ BL effect was positive and significant ($\beta = 0.19$, $t = 4.48$, $p < 0.001$), and when combined with the significant TBI $\rightarrow$ BL path shows AL partially mediates the TBI $\rightarrow$ BL relationship in a complementary fashion.

The PLS-MGA for the alternative model showed the same magnitude and significance as the original model for all paths not including BL. For the rest, a significant difference was found for TBI $\rightarrow$ BL (low EI $\beta = -.09$, high EI $\beta = .31$, $p < 0.01$), a marginally significant difference for AL $\rightarrow$ BL (low EI $\beta = .54$, high EI $\beta = .37$, $p < 0.10$) and a non-significant difference for CFS $\rightarrow$ BL (low EI $\beta = .06$, high EI $\beta = -.06$, $p = 0.26$).

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              Insert Figure III.
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5. Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to gain a better understanding of the roles that fan engagement and team brand image have for A-League fan satisfaction and fan loyalty. A number of fan-loyalty implications emerge from this research. First, from a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the sports-marketing literature by establishing a valid and reliable conceptual model of fan engagement (FE), team brand image (TBI) and

cumulative fan satisfaction (CFS) with the team as factors influencing attitudinal loyalty (AL) and behavioural loyalty (BL), with enduring involvement (EI) with the team as a moderator, for the context of A-League soccer fans. The study found support for all proposed hypotheses. These findings extend our understanding of the reasons why engaged A-League soccer fans are committed to and exhibit fan-related behaviours for their team. The results also offer support for our second-order specification of the TBI construct. The results of this study provide a basis for future research to advance the fan-loyalty discourse and allow us to derive a number of practical implications.

5.1 Theoretical implications

The results of this study suggest that the TBI construct formed by four non-product-related attributes – club history & tradition, logo & club colours, stadium, and fans – had a significant positive effect on cumulative fan satisfaction (H3), attitudinal loyalty (H4) and behavioural loyalty (H5). These results are consistent with previous research showing that TBI acts as an antecedent to CFS (e.g. Beccarini and Ferrand, 2006; Biscaia *et al.,* 2013), and drives consumer (fan) loyalty (e.g. Bauer *et al.,* 2008; Doyle *et al.,* 2013; Kunkel *et al.,* 2016; Liu *et al.*, 2019). In line with past research, the predictive effects of non-product related attributes in this study suggest that contextual factors are advantageous to building a strong team brand image without being reliant on core product-related attributes (Bauer *et al.,* 2013, 2008). Broadly translated, and consistent with similar conclusions drawn within the German and French soccer contexts (Bauer *et al.,* 2008; Blumrodt *et al.,* 2012), our findings suggest that TBI plays a pivotal role in fostering loyal A-League fans, irrespective of team success (Gladden and Funk, 2001; Kunkel *et al.,* 2016).

Consistent with the literature, results revealed that fan engagement, measured as a two-dimensional construct consisting of community engagement and brand

23

engagement, positively influenced both team brand image (H1) and cumulative fan satisfaction (H2) at the A-League team level. This positive finding is supported by studies that emphasised the direct link between FE and outcomes favourable to increased brand trust, brand loyalty, brand associations, trust and satisfaction (e.g. Brodie *et al.,* 2011; Cheung *et al*., 2020a; Cheung *et al*., 2020b; Hollebeek and Chen, 2014; Wong and Merrilees, 2015).

Despite the volume of literature that has focused on fan satisfaction with the team in the marketing domain, a paucity of research has investigated the relationship between CFS and loyalty in the A-League context. We acknowledge that there are considerable discussions amongst researchers as to the explanatory power of fan satisfaction and behavioural intentions, and argue that CFS is the better predictor of loyalty than transaction-specific satisfaction (Bodet, 2008; Koenigstorfer *et al.,* 2010; Olsen and Johnson, 2003). The complex model posited in this research (Figure I), which arguably is a better reflection of reality, identified that cumulative fan satisfaction with the team has a significant and positive influence on both AL (H6) and BL (H7) (e.g. Biscaia *et al.,* 2012; Biscaia *et al.,* 2017; Clemes *et al.,* 2011; Grey and Wert-Grey, 2012). This is an important contribution that address a gap in the literature and provides evidence that cumulative fan satisfaction influences both attitudinal and behavioural A-League fan loyalty.

Next, this study illustrates the moderating role of EI in the theoretical model. The PLS-MGA results identified low/high EI differences for the relationships between TBI and AL and between TBI and BL. Results partially support H8, namely, that less involved fans displayed the greater impact of TBI on AL than did more involved fans. Less involved fans seemed to associate non-product attributes with attitudinal loyalty stronger than highly involved fans. As highly passionate fans constantly support their team regardless of the team's performance (Funk and James, 2001), less involved fans regard contextual factors (i.e. non-product-related attributes) as having more importance in their being attitudinally loyal to

their team. Similarly, more involved fans would tend to have a more solidified, consistent image of and commitment to their team, whereas less involved fans are likely to also consider other entertainment options, especially if they perceive that the team suffers poor stadium conditions and unruly fans. Therefore, TBI has a greater role to play for less involved fans to ensure that the team's brand is part of their consideration set for entertainment alternatives (Keller, 2013; Kwon *et al.,* 2016). Interestingly, this tendency was reversed for BL, as the high-EI group showed a marginally greater impact of TBI on BL than did the low-EI group. Highly involved fans are more likely to display greater word-of-mouth and purchase intentions by developing a positive image for their team sponsor (Tsiotsou and Alexandris, 2009).

Finally, the alternative-model results support the literature on attitudinal loyalty mediating the cumulative satisfaction → behavioural-loyalty relationship (Jaiswal & Rakesh, 2011; Russell-Bennett *et al*., 2007). The finding that attitudinal loyalty mediates the TBI → behavioural-loyalty relationship also supports the literature (Soedarto *et al.*, 2019).

5.2 Practical implications

Some insightful implications flow from the findings of this research that may assist practitioners in developing their marketing strategies. The findings of our study support the need for teams to increase their market share through market-penetration strategies (e.g. Kunkel, *et al.,* 2014). For example, sport marketers need to formulate more strategic, fan-centric marketing-communication strategies in an attempt to attract new consumers to their sport whilst encouraging existing fans to consume more often – with a focus on digital, league-wide campaigns coupled with a focus on storytelling (similar to the FFA's 2016 A-League campaign, 'You Gotta Have a Team'). This specific initiative, which sought to attract the many Australian youths 15 and under who did not support a A-League team, or ones like

it, should be revamped and/or elevated to capture additional market share with the youth of Australia.

Additionally, given the positive influence team brand image has on cumulative fan satisfaction and attitudinal and behavioural loyalty, teams should focus on brand-development strategies that emphasise non-product related brand attributes. Additionally, teams could utilise the TBI scale as an indicator to plan and shape their branding by tracking changes related to present performance and marketing communications (Rose et al., 2020). The importance of the stadium experience, brand colours, history and other fans cannot be overlooked (e.g., attending a prestigious sports event can make them feel positive emotions; Moital *et al*., 2019). Given the lack of excitement in the A-League's stadium experience, stemming in part from the code's administrators curtailing some traditional in-game supporter groups and activities, along with a lack of history and tradition, the findings of this study suggest establishing a strong TBI (i.e. based on non-product-related attributes) may have a crucial role to play in helping to foster loyal fans for the A-League teams.

However, as an A-League stadium is typically owned by local or state government rather than the home team, this can present challenges for teams in supplying a unique experience that represents the team (Wang and Tang, 2018). Therefore, A-League teams are recommended to engage in stakeholder engagement to build relationships with the local/state government to maximise opportunities for stadium-enhancing developments that are sympathetic with soccer fans' expectations for the stadium as a part of the match-day experience.

From a practical perspective, A-League teams should make concerted efforts on social media platforms to emphasise non-product related attributes – history and tradition, modern stadium, fans, logo and colours – to strengthen TBI (Bauer *et al.,* 2008) and cultivate tradition in an attempt to build stronger team-fan relationships (Holzmüller *et al*., 2014; Rose

et al., 2020). Given the contributing role of fans to team revenue, fan-engagement strategies thru loyalty programs or exclusive fan membership access to special events (Biscaia *et al*., 2016; Grant *et al.,* 2011), for example, could pay dividends.

Lastly, the MGA analysis highlighted that team brand image is a particularly important driver of AL for less enduringly involved fans and BL for more enduringly involved fans. Therefore, sport-marketing practitioners should formulate interactive brand image strategies that appeal across fan affiliation personas, in particular, for highly involved fans with the club team. The proliferation of digital media provides teams with a real opportunity to engage with fans on multiple platforms, with informed messaging and personalized messaging – such as when and where to target less involved fans on social media (Barker *et al*., 2017). For instance, whenever the club team's logo or colour changes (e.g. the playing jersey changing), marketers should target less involved fans by promoting this on social media (Santos *et al*., 2019), as it also has significant effect on brand loyalty (Ismail, 2017) or even on customer lifetime value (Yu and Yuan, 2019). Fans' constant exposure to such marketing activity could also enhance their engagement in electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) behaviours (Ananda *et al*., 2019).

There are research limitations that should be kept in mind when seeking to compare and generalise these findings, but which also identify avenues for further research. First, a cross-sectional, Australian university-student sample was used. Future research could include a more diverse sample, including club members (i.e. registered supporters) for an A-League team and the broader casual-fan population. Future research could also test the model for fans in other countries and compare fans between countries with different cultural and economic contexts, such as Brazil and Germany. Second, although the overall sample was suitably large for PLS-SEM, the smaller EI group sizes may have affected the ability for several paths to achieve significance for that group in the PLS-MGA analysis, along with detecting significant

27

coefficient differences between groups. Third, other factors may also play a role in explaining soccer fan loyalty, such as fan identification, motivations, following sport (i.e. ongoing search), co-creation and constraints, and there is a need to research their influence. Lastly, considering A-League attendance is on the decline, future research could investigate the extent to which creating a similar stadium atmosphere as in the more popular Australian Football League (AFL) would assist in building the A-League's attendance and revenue base.

6. Conclusion

The present study begins to fill a gap in the sport-marketing literature, by providing a better understanding of what contributes to fan loyalty for Australian professional soccer teams (Kunkel and Funk, 2014). Building on the existing sports marketing literature, the model developed in this study will enable sport managers to more comprehensively measure the relationships amongst fan engagement, team brand image, cumulative fan satisfaction, attitudinal loyalty and behavioural loyalty, whilst examining the moderating role of enduring involvement with the team. This study increases our understanding of the reasons why A-League fans are committed to and exhibit fan-related behaviours for a team, finding that fan engagement influences both team brand image and cumulative fan satisfaction, whilst team brand image also influences cumulative fan satisfaction, and both of these constructs influence attitudinal loyalty and behavioural loyalty. The study also found that attitudinal loyalty has a fully mediating role in the cumulative fan satisfaction $\rightarrow$ behavioural-loyalty relationship and partially mediating role in the TBI $\rightarrow$ behavioural loyalty relationship. Moderating effects of enduring involvement with the team were revealed for team brand image and attitudinal loyalty, along with team brand image and behavioural loyalty. Based on this information, practical implications have been provided, including suggestions on how

Australian sports-marketers might increase team brand image, cumulative fan satisfaction and fan loyalty.

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Table I. Summary of item means and factor loadings

Items	M	λ
Attitudinal loyalty		
I would be willing to defend my favourite team publicly, even if it caused controversy	3.6	0.76
I could never change my affiliation from my favourite team to another professional team	4.6	0.91
I consider myself a committed fan of my favourite team	5.0	0.91
I would watch my favourite team regardless of which team they were playing against at the time	5.1	0.89
Behavioural loyalty		
Home games attended	2.6	0.86
Away games attended	1.6	0.82
Number of items of team merchandise owned	2.2	0.71
Cumulative fan satisfaction		
The entertainment value of the games of your favourite team that you watched	7.4	0.90
The effort put in by the players of your favourite team	7.6	0.91
Team performance (i.e. quality of play by your team)	7.4	0.86
The excellence of the contest (i.e. the quality/standard of play by both teams)	7.5	0.89
Overall, how satisfied are you with your favourite team?	7.7	0.86
FE - Community engagement		
I am an engaged member of my favourite team's community	3.0	0.93
I am an active member of my favourite team's community	3.1	0.95
I am an interacting member of my favourite team's community	3.1	0.96
I am a participating member of my favourite team's community	3.1	0.95
FE – Brand engagement		
I like discussing my favourite team with others	4.7	0.94
I like surfing my favourite team's website on the Internet	4.8	0.93
TBI - Club history & tradition		
How strongly do you associate the club history and tradition with your favourite team?	4.8	0.87
How do you feel about the club history and tradition of your favourite team?	5.0	0.86
In comparison with other teams, how unique are the club history and tradition with respect to your favourite team?	4.8	0.81
TBI - Fans		
How strongly do you associate the fans with your favourite team?	5.1	0.90
How do you feel about the fans of your favourite team?	5.1	0.88
In comparison with other teams, how unique are the fans with respect to your favourite team?	4.9	0.83
TBI - Logo & colours		
How strongly do you associate the logo and club colours with your favourite team?	5.1	0.82
How do you feel about the logo and club colours of your favourite team?	5.3	0.86
In comparison with other teams, how unique are the logo and club colours with respect to your favourite team?	4.9	0.81
TBI - Modern stadium		
How strongly do you associate the modern stadium with your favourite team?	4.9	0.87
How do you feel about the modern stadium of your favourite team?	5.1	0.85

	M	λ
In comparison with other teams, how unique is the modern stadium with respect to your favourite team?	4.9	0.82
Enduring involvement		
Your feelings in regard to watching games of your favourite team …		
Not fun/Fun	6.4	0.76
Unappealing/Appealing	6.2	0.86
Boring/Interesting	6.1	0.85
Unexciting/Exciting	6.2	0.81
Dull/ Fascinating	5.9	0.87
Not part of my self-image/Part of my self-image	5.1	0.78

Notes: M = Means, λ = factor loadings, FE = Fan Engagement, TBI = Team Brand Image, item means and loadings are reported for the first-order dimensions of FE and TBI; all loadings significant ($p < 0.001$).

Table II. Measurement model assessment

Constructs	Cronbach's α	Composite reliability	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Attitudinal loyalty	0.89	0.92	0.75
Behavioural loyalty	0.71	0.84	0.63
Cumulative fan satisfaction	0.93	0.95	0.78
FE - Community engagement[#]	0.96	0.97	0.89
FE – Brand engagement[#]	0.86	0.93	0.88
TBI - Club history & tradition[#]	0.80	0.88	0.71
TBI - Fans[#]	0.84	0.90	0.76
TBI - Logo & colours[#]	0.78	0.87	0.69
TBI - Modern stadium[#]	0.81	0.89	0.72

Notes: FE = Fan Engagement, TBI = Team Brand Image; [#] = first-order dimension of the HOC

Table III. Construct correlation matrix

Latent variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Age	*1*								
2. Attitudinal loyalty	0.10	*0.87*							
3. Behavioural loyalty	0.13	0.59	*0.80*						
4. Cumulative fan satisfaction	0.02	0.55	0.42	*0.89*					
5. Community engagement	0.05	0.59	0.68	0.40	*0.95*				
6. Brand engagement	0.07	0.69	0.60	0.65	0.62	*0.94*			
7. Fan engagement HOC	0.06	0.68	0.72	0.54	0.96	0.83	*0.86*		
8. Team brand image HOC^	0.10	0.63	0.50	0.54	0.52	0.61	0.61	**-**	
9. Gender	-0.10	-0.41	-0.33	-0.42	-0.27	-0.38	-0.34	-0.37	*1*

Notes: Stage two reported; Bolded italic values (on diagonal) are the square root of the AVE; all others are correlations coefficients; ^ AVE not applicable for TBI due to its formative nature.

Table IV. PLS structural model and MGA results

Fan Engagement HOC (second-order model)	Total Sample (*n* = 207)	Low EI (*n* = 99)	High EI (*n* = 108)
Community engagement^	.96***	.95***	.96***
Brand engagement^	.83***	.78***	.79***
Team Brand Image HOC (second-order model)			
Club History & Tradition&	.84***	.80***	.70***
Fans&	.95***	.93***	.92***
Logo & Colours&	.82***	.85***	.75***
Modern Stadium&	.89***	.78***	.94***

Structural Paths	Total Sample (*n* = 207)	Low EI (*n* = 99)	High EI (*n* = 108)	PLS-MGA Sig. Pairwise Differences (*p*-value)
Control variables to Attitudinal Loyalty				
Age	.04	.02	.07	N/A
Gender	-.14*	-.12#	-.03	N/A
Control variables to Behavioural Loyalty				
Age	.08	-.07	.19*	N/A
Gender	-.12*	-.13#	-.12#	N/A
H1: Fan Engagement → Team Brand Image	.61***	.55***	.56***	.44
H2: Fan Engagement → Cumulative Fan Satisfaction	.33***	.21#	.25**	.41
H3: Team Brand Image → Cumulative Fan Satisfaction	.34***	.34*	.37***	.44
H4: Team Brand Image → Attitudinal Loyalty	.44***	.51***	.22#	.03*
H5: Team Brand Image → Behavioural Loyalty	.36***	.15	.39***	.09#
H6: Cumulative Fan Satisfaction → Attitudinal Loyalty	.26***	.16*	.28*	.24
H7: Cumulative Fan Satisfaction → Behavioural Loyalty	.17*	.17	.06	.28
Explanatory Ability (*R²*)				
R² of Team Brand Image	.37	.30	.31	
R² of Cumulative Fan Satisfaction	.36	.23	.30	
R² of Attitudinal Loyalty	.48	.44	.20	
R² of Behavioural Loyalty	.30	.12	.27	
AVA	*.38*	*.27*	*.27*	

Notes: Stage 2 LVS-based results reported; Standardised Beta (*β*) weights reported for path coefficients, one-tailed tests used for path significance; ^ = first-order path on FE HOC; & = LVS loading on TBI HOC; Two-tailed tests used for MGA differences; * Significant at # *p* < 0.10, * *p* < 0.05, ** *p* < 0.01, *** *p* < 0.001; All *R²* values exceed the .10 criterion; AVA = average variance accounted for.
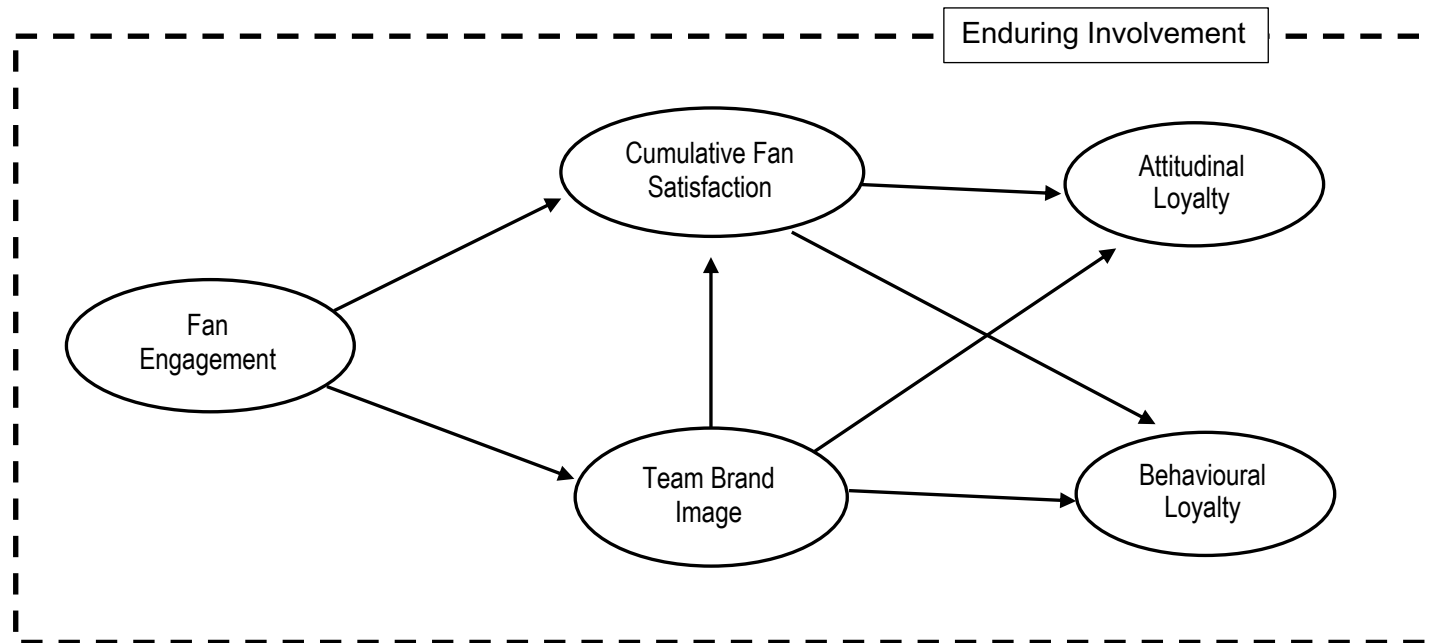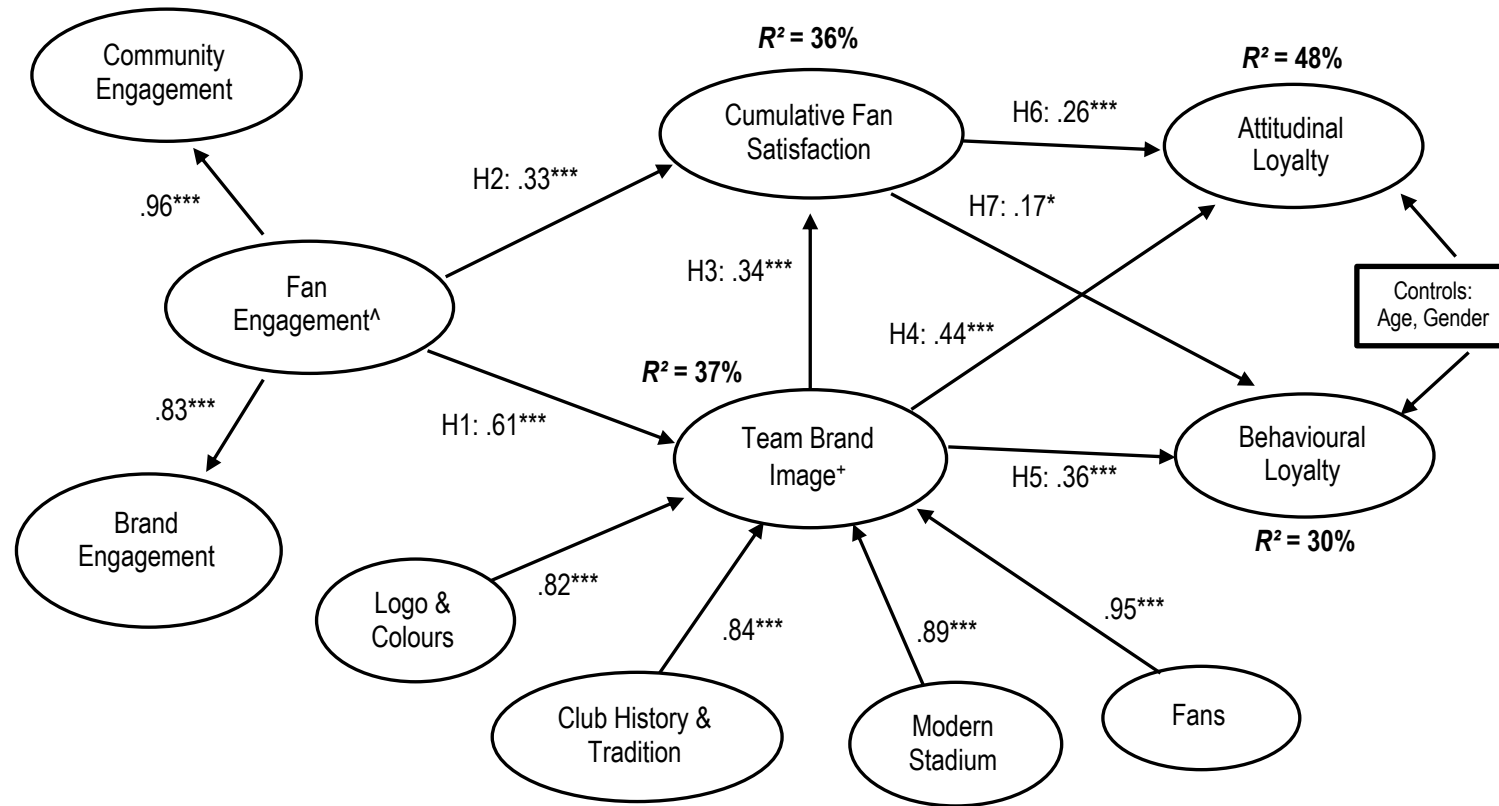
Figure I. Conceptual model

Figure II. Conceptual model - H1-H7 results

Notes: Total sample used; Stage 2 results using LVS scores shown; All paths (standardised Beta (β) weights) and loadings significant at * $p <$ 0.05, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$, one-tailed; ^ = Type I reflective-reflective HOC; + = Type II reflective-formative HOC; LVS loadings shown for TBI first-order dimensions; Average Variance Accounted for (AVA) = 0.38.

Figure III. Alternative model: Attitudinal Loyalty → Behavioural Loyalty path added
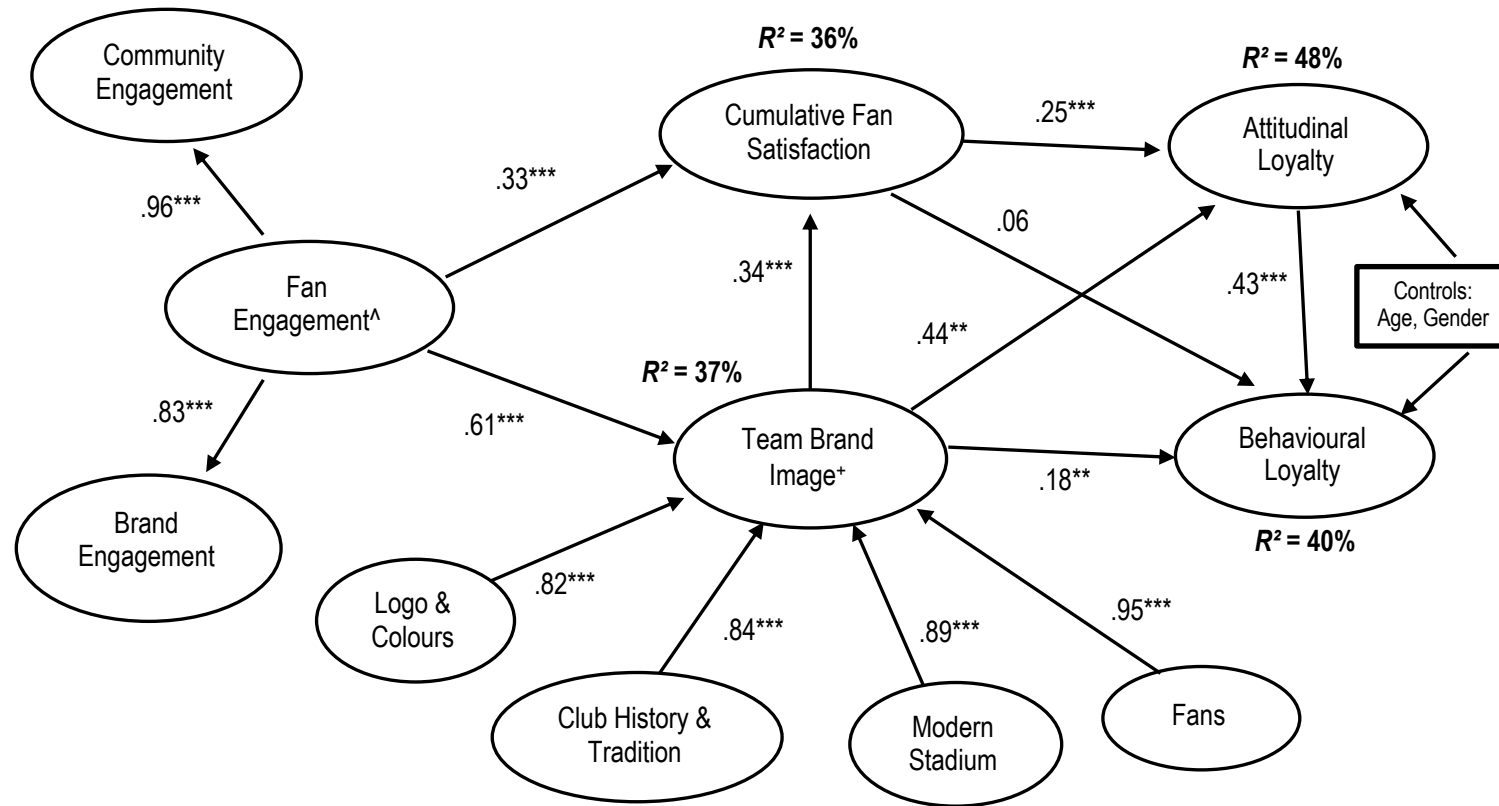
Notes: Full sample used; Stage 2 results using LVS scores shown; All paths (standardised Beta (β) weights) and first-order loadings significant at * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$, one-tailed; ^ = Type I reflective-reflective HOC; + = Type II reflective-formative HOC; LVS loadings shown for FE and TBI first-order dimensions; Average Variance Accounted for (AVA) = 0.40.