



EASM 2023 CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

BOOK OF ABSTRACTS

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Belfast, Northern Ireland

**Forward Thinking in Sport Management:
Inclusivity, Accessibility, and Sustainability**



EASM would like to thank Belfast City Council, Tourism Northern Ireland and Visit Belfast for their support of the EASM Conference 2023.

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ID: 2364**Sustainability and Sport Management - Revised Version**

Topics: Equity, Diversity and Inclusion in Sport Management

Pro-Environmental Benefits of Being Deeply in Love with the Club: How Brand Love Foster Fans' Sustainable Behaviours.

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1. Aim and Research Questions

Previous studies have often pointed out how the importance of fans' emotional connection with sport organizations (Koenigstorfer et al., 2010). However, little is known about how this connection can benefit society as a whole, particularly in terms of pro-environmental behaviours. This research aims to examine the relationship between fans' perception of clubs' pro-environmental sustainability initiatives and their pro-environmental behaviours, as well as the moderating role that brand love may exert in this relationship.

2. Theoretical Background and Literature Review

There is a tendency for consumers to value the efforts made by brands toward sustainability (McCullough et al., 2020). Similar to other sectors, sport is not immune to pressures, problems and challenges in terms of the environment, the use of resources and climate change (Breitbarth et al., 2023). Sport fans' perceptions of pro-environmental sustainability initiatives by professional clubs have been researched under different paradigms and it is often suggested that investment in sustainability generates both club and social benefits (Cayolla et al., 2023). Nevertheless, despite sport fans developing strong emotional connections with their clubs, the role of brand love in this relationship is yet to be known. The inclusion of brand love (i.e., a deep love relationship) is important because the brand helps to define a fan's identity (Ahuvia, 2022) and, thus, is expected to encourage favourable behaviours. In this sense, we aim to examine the moderator role of brand love in the relationship between fans' perception of clubs' pro-environmental sustainability initiatives and their pro-environmental behaviours.

3. Research Design, Methodology and Data Analysis

Data were collected in partnership with a professional football club, with an online self-administered questionnaire (n=1,537) distributed to members registered in the database. All items were measured on a 7-point Likert-Type scale (1=Strongly Disagree to 7=Strongly Agree), Fans' perception of clubs' pro-environmental sustainability was measured through 6 items and Fans's pro-environmental behaviours were captured through 7 items adapted from Cayolla et al. (2023), while brand love was captured through 6 items adapted from Bagozzi et al. (2017). Data were analysed using AMOS 22.0, and a two-step structural equation modelling was carried out.

4. Results/Findings and Discussion

The results of the CFA showed an acceptable fit to the data [$\chi^2(53)=408,184$ ($p<.001$); $\chi^2/df = 7,702$; CFI=.977; TLI=.967; NFI=.974; RMSEA=.066 (CI=.060-.072); SRMR=.0497]. The composite reliability (CR) values were above the cut-off point of .70 (.86<CR<.94), and convergent validity was accepted given that the AVE values ranged from .62 to .89. Discriminant validity was also accepted as the AVE value for each construct was greater than the squared correlation between that construct and any other. Similarly, the assessment of the structural model indicated an acceptable fit to the data [$\chi^2(79)=676,330$ ($p<.001$); $\chi^2/df = 8,561$; CFI=.963; TLI=.943; NFI=.958; RMSEA=.070 (CI=.065-.075)]. The analysis of the path

coefficients indicates that fans' perceptions of club pro-environmental sustainability initiatives positively influence fan's pro-environmental daily behaviours (SRE=.605; $p < 0.001$). Also, brand love positively moderated the relationship between fans' perception of club' pro-environmental sustainability initiatives and their pro-environmental behaviours (X^2 Diff = 447,641; $p < 0.001$, such that the relationship between club pro-environmental sustainability initiatives and fans' pro-environmental daily behaviours is higher for fans with very high brand love (SRE=.620; $p < 0.001$) than for fans with high brand love (SRE=.534; $p < 0.001$). The model accounted for approximately 41% of the variance in fan's pro-environmental behaviour ($R^2=.41$). These findings suggest there is a learning effect from fans and clubs appearing as teaching levers as suggested by the literature (Casper et al., 2020) and brand love seems to moderates it. This is important because both academics (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006) and practitioners (Roberts, 2006) emphasize the managerial importance of the feeling of love toward a brand, and this research advances how this stronger emotional connection may be beneficial for society as a whole.

5. Conclusion, Contribution and Implication

These results suggest that fan's brand love moderates the relationship between club pro-environmental initiatives and fans daily pro-environmental behaviours, strengthening it. By incorporating the brand into the consumer's identity, brand love is vital for achieving better performances in the fan's environmental sustainability behaviour. In this way, it is up to managers to create and better communicate the initiatives executed or to be implemented to promote reinforcement of love towards the fans' brand.