

The mediating role of sports team love in the relationship between cognitive engagement and eFANgelism

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aimed to examine the impact of cognitive engagement on eFANgelism through the mediating role of sports team love.

Design/methodology/approach – A conceptual model was designed to formulate hypotheses, which were then tested quantitatively through Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). Data for testing the model were collected from 313 sports fans of Young Africans Sports Club and Simba Sports Club in Dodoma City, Tanzania.

Findings – The study revealed that elevated levels of cognitive attention and absorption inspire sports fans to cultivate a strong passion and commitment to their team. In turn, these highly passionate and dedicated fans are motivated to express their loyalty through evangelistic behavior.

Originality/value – By contributing to the extension of brand evangelism into sports industry, this paper highlights the pivotal role of cognitive engagement in encouraging sports fans toward eFANgelism. This study is one of the few scholarly efforts to shed light on the mechanisms that can inspire fans to exhibit evangelistic behavior.

Keywords Cognitive engagement, Sports team love, eFANgelism

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In recent times, evangelistic behavior has extended into sports, giving rise to the concept of eFANgelism (Amani, 2023). eFANgelism represents an advanced form of attitudinal behavior, where highly devoted fans passionately advocate for their favorite sports teams or brands, promoting their values, identity, and legacy through social interactions and active community involvement (Ahmet and Mehmet, 2022; Yüzgenç *et al.*, 2022). In the modern sports industry, fans are expected to play a major role beyond traditional forms of support, such as attending games, viewing matches, and demonstrating loyalty (Amani, 2023). Sports fans are now regarded as value co-creators (Kolyperas *et al.*, 2019), contributing significantly to the elevation of sports teams reputation (Pepur *et al.*, 2023). Through eFANgelism, fans actively participate in building and promoting the value of sports teams, creating a foundation for attracting potential investments, including sponsorships (Büyükcakgöl *et al.*, 2022; Park *et al.*, 2021).

Unlike other attitudinal behaviors, such as fan loyalty and game attendance, eFANgelism provides a holistic framework for understanding sports fan behavior from various perspectives, including advertising, advocacy, assimilation, and antagonism (Amani, 2023). Extant literature indicates that sports fans exhibit positive behavior toward their teams when they are fully engaged with their favorite sports teams (Altun *et al.*, 2020). The emphasis on involving sports fans in building the value of their teams has been accelerated by a dramatic shift in sports team management, which focuses on strengthening fan engagement to create robust sports teams brand (Amani, 2023; Pepur *et al.*, 2023). This shift, among other things, involves fostering strong connections with fans to ensure their lasting commitment (Pepur

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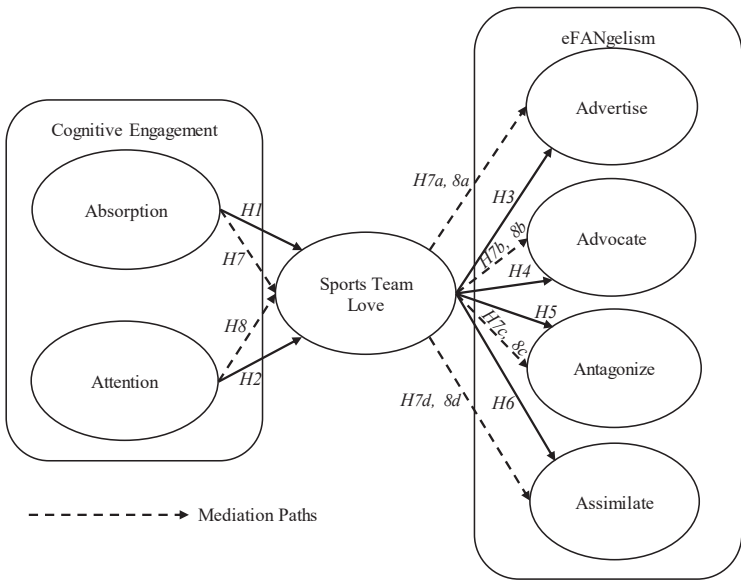
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et al., 2023). From a service logic perspective, brands are ultimately owned by customers. Therefore, eFANGelism, as an integral aspect of value co-creation, is enabled by transitioning from a transactional to a relational approach in brand-consumer interactions (*Amani, 2023*).

Seminal work in the sports domain suggests that eFANGelism is driven by fans' deep connection to a sports team brand, motivating them to passionately share team-related beliefs and engage in team-centered interactions (*Dwyer et al., 2015*). *Pepur et al. (2023)* highlight that eFANGelism is essential for the future of professional sports team management and should be embraced as a key driver for achieving value co-creation in the sports industry. From an economic and business perspective, eFANGelism is particularly relevant to recent transformations in the sports sector, as it involves fans voluntarily and actively promoting the products and services offered by sports teams (*Amani, 2023; Pepur et al., 2023*). Despite the importance of eFANGelism in driving transformation and reform within sports domain worldwide (*Pepur et al., 2023*), considerable attention has not yet been devoted to examining its antecedents and consequences (*Amani, 2023*).

Scholarly efforts, such as those by *Dwyer et al. (2015)*, have introduced evangelism into the sports domain; however, these efforts have not been extensively supported by existing studies. There is limited evidence on the mechanisms that can promote eFANGelism in the sports industry, despite its significance to the industry's economy (*Amani, 2023; Pepur et al., 2023*). A few studies suggest that eFANGelism behavior can be influenced by factors such as fan identification and fan community identification (*Amani, 2023*), ethnocentrism (*Büyükkagül et al., 2022*), corporate affiliation (*Ahmet and Mehmet, 2022*), and brand loyalty and identity (*Gholami Ghajari and Kalateh Seifari, 2019*). Yet, *Amani (2023) Pepur et al. (2023)* states that current scholarly efforts to examine the antecedents of eFANGelism remain insufficient, given its multifaceted nature.

This study aims to examine the predictive role of cognitive engagement in fostering eFANGelism among sports fans in Tanzania. The proposed conceptual framework in *Figure 1* is based on the S-O-R (Stimulus-Organism-Response) model, wherein cognitive engagement is posited to create an environment (stimulus) that evokes an internal emotional state



Source(s): Author's own work

Figure 1. Conceptual model

specifically, sports team love. This internal state, in turn, leads to behavioral outcomes characterized by evangelistic behavior. Cognitive engagement, as a stimulus, encompasses an individual's attention, absorption, and conscious mental involvement with brand-related information. The study proposes that sports fans with high levels of cognitive attention and absorption are more likely to develop a strong sense of love toward their teams. This passion and commitment are theorized to promote responses such as evangelistic behavior toward the sports team and the broader sports industry. The remainder of the study is organized as follows: First, the literature review and development of hypotheses are presented, followed by the methodology, data analysis, and presentation of findings. Next, the discussion of findings and the conclusions are provided, including both theoretical and managerial recommendations. Finally, the study identifies limitations and areas for future research.

Literature review and development of hypotheses

Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model

The study establishes a theoretical framework based on the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model. Originally developed in the field of environmental psychology, the S-O-R model has been adapted for use in various other areas, including marketing, sports marketing, and tourism marketing. This model comprises three key components: stimulus, organism, and response. It demonstrates how specific environmental features (stimuli) trigger cognitive and emotional responses (organisms) that ultimately lead to particular behaviors (responses) (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). Stimuli are external influences that induce changes in an individual's internal state, prompting actions or reactions. The organism component reflects the internal cognitive and emotional processes activated by the stimuli, serving as the intermediary between stimulus and response. Cognitive processes relate to how information is processed, while affective processes pertain to the individual's feelings and emotions. The response signifies the behavioral intention or action taken by the individual. In this study, the S-O-R model is employed to construct a theoretical framework that posits that cognitive engagement generates environments (stimuli) that elicit an internal emotional state represented as sports team love. Ultimately, this internal state leads to behavioral outcomes characterized by evangelistic behavior.

Sports team love

Sports team love encompasses the extra-role brand behaviors displayed by sports fans when they actively engage with their favorite sports teams and their affiliates (Relationship, 2023). It is growing very fast as an essential component in building sports team reputation, fan loyalty, and in attracting sponsors (Amani, 2019). Love towards a sports team is the source of various positive behaviors, including stadium attendance, positive recommendations, purchase of merchandise, sports team brand defense, etc (Amani, 2023). Theoretically, love is expected to stimulate various intrinsic behaviors, including positive behaviors such as team loyalty and negative behaviors such as aggressive behavior towards rival sports teams and their affiliates (Daniels et al., 2020). Sports team love reflects an individual's heightened excitement following interaction with a sports team. It represents the passions, intimacy, and commitment that fans possess with their sports teams (Wong and Hung, 2023). It is a powerful mix of inspiration, pride, and passion for their favorite teams and their affiliates. Enthusiasm serves as a marker of engagement, reflecting a fan's loyalty and admiration for their team, which often translates into extra-role behavior (Amani, 2023). Sports team love entails a sustained sense of pleasure and energy that remains independent of performance assessments. This quality of love means that fans continue to support their teams and their affiliates even when performance falls short. Furthermore, this enduring affection can lead to a robust community among fans, fostering connections that enhance the overall experience of being part of a sports culture (Amani, 2019). The emotional investment in a team often results in fans becoming

advocates for the team, sharing their passion with others through social media and community events. Ultimately, sports team love not only strengthens the bond between fans and their teams but also plays a crucial role in shaping the broader identity of the sports community.

Cognitive engagement

The concept of engagement has been extensively explored across various fields, including marketing, tourism, and sports marketing. Within the marketing domain, it has been particularly significant in understanding the interactions between customers and brands (Amani, 2023). Customer engagement is often discussed as a potential driver of various positive behaviors, such as purchase intentions, positive recommendations, loyalty, and patronage (Chahal *et al.*, 2020). Despite the widespread adoption of engagement concepts across different domains, there remains a lack of clarity and consensus in the literature regarding its conceptualization and operationalization. However, scholars generally agree that engagement should be viewed as a phenomenon comprising cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. This study focuses on cognitive engagement, which encompasses both absorption and attention. Previous research by Shin and Back (2020) indicates that cognitive engagement can be effectively conceptualized through these two constructs. Cognitive engagement refers to an individual's attention, absorption, and conscious mental involvement with brand-related information (Amani, 2023). It encompasses the individual's ability to process information related to the brand, which is likely to satisfy instrumental motives, such as utility and relevant informational needs. This cognitive engagement stimulates individuals' cognitive processes and elaboration of brand-related information, subsequently motivating them to participate in brand-related activities, including positive recommendations, patronage, loyalty, and both initial and repeat purchases.

Absorption

Previous research in the marketing field has identified absorption as a form of cognitive engagement characterized by a pleasurable state where individuals eagerly immerse themselves in interaction with a chosen focal object (Chahal *et al.*, 2020). Engagement theory posits that this sense of absorption leads individuals to internalize the focal object, often perceiving it as an extension of their identity. In this context, absorption compels individuals to concentrate intensely, often losing track of time and finding it challenging to disengage from discussions related to the focal object (Shin and Back, 2020). Within the realm of sports industry, absorption reflects the level of engagement that cultivates a strong sense of admiration, as fans invest substantial time, effort, and resources in supporting their teams and their affiliates, primarily sponsors (Vaughan and Laborde, 2021). Foundational studies in sports industry highlight that absorption signifies a state of deep cognitive focus on specific tasks aimed at supporting sports teams and their affiliates (Amani, 2023). When fans become absorbed in their support for their teams, they frequently experience a sense of ownership, which further enhances feelings of admiration and enjoyment (Stolarski *et al.*, 2022). Fans who exhibit high levels of absorption are often driven to engage in extra-role behaviors, such as making positive recommendations, demonstrating loyalty, attending games, and defending their team's brand (Amani, 2019). This study proposes that absorption fosters deep concentration and immersion in the experiences associated with sports teams and their sponsors, leading to a phenomenon known as evangelism. In light of this theoretical framework, the study posits the following hypothesis:

H1. Absorption positively influences sports team love.

Attention

The customer engagement literature conceptualizes attention as a distinct cognitive resource that individuals direct toward a focal object (Chahal *et al.*, 2020; Marmat, 2023). As a form of

cognitive engagement, attention represents a significant level of mental commitment, shown by actively seeking information, news, and awareness about the focal object (Shin and Back, 2020). Attention captures the inclination of fans to focus intensively on their favorite teams and related affiliates, often leading to feelings of admiration and reverence (Amani, 2019). This cognitive aspect of engagement embodies the mental and emotional dedication fans show toward their sports team and its affiliates, fostering a deep sense of admiration (Ma et al., 2022). Attention is measurable by the time fans invest in thinking deeply about their favorite teams, their sponsors, and the broader fan community (Vaughan and Laborde, 2021). Scholer and Higgins (2009) further clarify that attention as cognitive engagement is evident in scenarios where focused viewers remain absorbed in the central content, such as a movie, despite distractions a process that demonstrates sustained concentration, an inherently limited resource. Highly engaged fans exhibit this strong attention by focusing even more intently on their teams and affiliates, intensifying feelings of admiration or satisfaction (Amani, 2023). Based on this conceptual understanding, the study proposes the following hypothesis:

H2. Attention positively influences sports team love.

eFANgelism

The growing influence of sports fans in advancing professionalism within the sports industry has sparked increased scholarly focus on fan behavior (Amani, 2023; Pepur et al., 2023). A particularly notable behavior is eFANgelism, an extension of brand evangelism that involves fans actively sharing positive views and passionately encouraging others to support a specific brand or sports team (Park et al., 2021). In general, brand evangelism is characterized by consumers' enthusiastic efforts to endorse a brand, aiming to persuade others to purchase and engage with it (Kinyongoh, 2019). Brand evangelists are dedicated consumers who not only promote the brand but also attempt to "spread the good word" and convert others into loyal followers (Amani, 2023). This behavior is often shown through actions such as purchasing the brand, recommending it to others, and defending it by displaying loyalty against rival brands (Pepur et al., 2023). eFANgelism, as an extension of brand evangelism, is a vibrant behavior where passionate sports fans actively communicate positively about their favorite team (Pepur et al., 2023). This behavior stems from a strong emotional bond that fans feel, marked by loyalty and patriotic attachment to their team and its affiliates, including sponsors. In the sports industry domain, theories adapted from consumer markets suggest that eFANgelism is fueled by fans' deep identification, affiliation, attachment, loyalty, and engagement with the team (Amani, 2023). Current research highlights the need to further explore this advanced fan behavior (Pepur et al., 2023), as it plays a vital role in driving the sports industry's growth toward greater commercialization and professionalism (Amani, 2023).

eFANgelism is conceptualized as a fan behavior in which fans actively engage in activities such as advertising, advocating, assimilating, and antagonizing (Amani, 2023; Dwyer et al., 2015). This suggests that eFANgelism is a multifaceted construct, encompassing a range of behaviors that highlight the complexity of fan interactions within the sports industry (Ahmet and Mehmet, 2022). In certain instances, fans evangelize for their team by engaging in advertising activities, which include actions like promoting and displaying team merchandise to showcase their allegiance (Amani, 2023). Fans often display these items publicly by wearing team apparel, placing decals on personal vehicles, decorating personal spaces, or sharing their support on social media platforms. Additionally, fans advocate for their favorite team by emphasizing its superiority over rivals. This advocacy behavior is often fueled by factors such as team performance, sports team heritage, fan loyalty, and the quality of merchandise associated with the team (Pepur et al., 2023). eFANgelism also encompasses antagonistic behaviors toward rival teams and their affiliates. This can involve provocative interactions with supporters of competing teams, sharing negative or oppositional views, and, in some cases, displaying hostility toward rival teams and their sponsors (Amani, 2019). Another dimension of eFANgelism is assimilation, reflecting a fan's deep identification with

the broader network of team affiliates, including fellow fans and sponsors. Assimilation behaviors are evident in regular stadium attendance, participation in gatherings of supporters, and wearing team apparel as symbols of solidarity and support (Amani, 2023; Dwyer *et al.*, 2015). Based on this conceptual framework, the study proposes the following hypotheses:

- H3. Sports team love positively influences advertise.
- H4. Sports team love positively influences advocate.
- H5. Sports team love positively influences antagonize.
- H6. Sports team love positively influences assimilation.
- H7a. Sports team love positively mediates the relationship between absorption and advertise.
- H7b. Sports team love positively mediates the relationship between absorption and advocate.
- H7c. Sports team love positively mediates the relationship between absorption and antagonize.
- H7d. Sports team love positively mediates the relationship between absorption and assimilation.
- H8a. Sports team love positively mediates the relationship between attention and advertise.
- H8b. Sports team love positively mediates the relationship between attention and advocate.
- H8c. Sports team love positively mediates the relationship between attention and antagonize.
- H8d. Sports team love positively mediates the relationship between attention and assimilation.

Methodology

The study setting

This cross-sectional study was conducted in Dodoma City, Tanzania, focusing on fans of two selected sports teams: Young Africans Sports Club and Simba Sports Club. Dodoma was chosen as the study location because it serves as the capital city of Tanzania, attracting a diverse population from various regions across the country (Amani, 2024). This diversity allows for a representative sample of respondents that reflects the broader Tanzanian population. The selection of Young Africans Sports Club and Simba Sports Club is based on their longstanding history within the sports industry, both in Tanzania and Africa (Amani, 2019; Omari, 2019). These teams hold significant cultural heritage linked to Tanzania’s history and the development of the nation’s sports sector. They are also among the most popular sports teams on the continent. According to the International Federation of Football History and Statistics (IFFHS), Young Africans Sports Club is ranked 4th, while Simba Sports Club is ranked 15th among the top football clubs in Africa (IFFHS, 2024). Furthermore, the performance of both teams in various Confederation of African Football (CAF) competitions

has contributed to the Tanzanian Premier League (NBC Premier League) being recognized by IFFHS as one of the top 10 football leagues in Africa (Ben, 2024). The match between Simba Sports Club and Young Africans Sports Club, known as the Kariakoo Derby (Beez, 2006), is considered one of the five most intense and well-known derbies in Africa, alongside the Cairo Derby, Soweto Derby, Casablanca Derby, and Tunis Derby (Ditlhobolo, 2021).

Sampling procedures and survey administration

The target population for this study was not clearly defined, prompting the use of convenience sampling, a non-probability technique, to determine the sample size. With this approach, the sample size was based on factors such as accessibility, availability, and the willingness of participants to engage in the study (Jawad, 2022; Stratton, 2021). Respondents were approached in high-traffic areas, including university campuses, shopping malls, the city center, and entertainment venues. To mitigate the potential bias associated with convenience sampling, several recommendations were implemented: (1) respondents were approached and completed the questionnaire at different times and on various days throughout the data collection period; (2) a relatively large sample size was maintained to ensure representativeness of the broader population; and (3) the selection of respondents was conducted with care to reflect a diverse demographic profile, including gender. Before participating, respondents provided verbal consent to fill out the questionnaire. The criteria for inclusion required that each respondent be a follower of the selected sports teams and a supporter of the sports industry in Tanzania. Data collection occurred from June to August 2023, during which 350 questionnaires were distributed. After initial scrutiny, 37 questionnaires were discarded due to incompleteness or multiple responses to a single question, resulting in 313 valid responses, yielding a response rate of 89.4%. This sample size of 313 is deemed adequate for studies employing multivariate data analysis techniques, such as Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), which were used in this research. It is recommended that for PLS-SEM, a sample size of over 250 is sufficient to ensure model stability and robustness of the findings (Hair et al., 2019).

Development of questionnaire and measures

The study employed reliable and valid measurement scales derived from foundational works in marketing and sports marketing. The measures for cognitive engagement were adapted from (Shin and Back, 2020), while the measures for sports team love were sourced from (Daniels et al., 2020). Additionally, the measures for eFANgelism were borrowed from (Amani, 2023; Dwyer et al., 2015). The selection of these measures was guided by a thorough and systematic literature review to ensure the study's alignment with the sports marketing domain. To enhance the accuracy of measurement, multiple items were used to capture the variables, a practice that is strongly recommended in social science research to minimize measurement errors (Churchill Jr, 1979). Respondents rated all measures on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Data analysis

Measurement model: reliability and validity issues

The reliability and validity of the reflective measurement model were assessed using standardized factor loadings (λ), Cronbach's alpha (α), composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio, and cross-loadings. The results in Table 1 confirm that the measurement model's reliability was robust, as Cronbach's alpha for all variables exceeded the threshold of 0.7 (Cronbach, 1951). Furthermore, as shown in Table 1, the composite reliability coefficients also surpassed 0.7 (Peterson and Kim, 2013), indicating strong reliability. Convergent validity was established as factor loadings exceeded 0.7 for all items (Hu and Bentler, 1999), demonstrating that each item loaded well onto its

Table 1. Reliability and validity of measurement model

Construct	Code	Measurement items	λ	α	CR (rho_a)	CR (rho_c)	AVE
Absorption	abso1	When I am interacting with my favorite sports team news and stories, I forget everything else around me	0.703	0.843	0.877	0.882	0.599
	abso2	Times flies when I am interacting with news and stories about my favorite sports team	0.806				
	abso3	When I am interacting with news and stories about my favorite sports team, it is difficult to detach myself	0.758				
	abso4	In my interaction with news and stories about my favorite sports team, I am immersed	0.845				
	abso5	When I am interacting with news and stories about my favorite sports team, I feel happy	0.752				
Attention	atte1	I like to learn more about my favorite sports team	0.828	0.898	0.913	0.924	0.711
	atte2	A pay a lot of attention to my favorite sports team issues	0.910				
	atte3	Anything related to my favorite sports team grabs my attention	0.886				
	atte4	I concentrate a lot on my favorite sports team issues	0.848				
	atte5	I spend a lot of time thinking about my favorite sports team	0.731				
Sports team love	stlo1	I feel excited about my favorite sports team	0.853	0.904	0.905	0.933	0.777
	stlo2	I love my favorite sports team	0.918				
	stlo3	I am heavily into my favorite sports team	0.911				
	stlo4	I am passionate about my favorite sports team	0.841				
Advertise	adve1	I display my favorite sports team merchandise on my properties, e.g. car, computers, mobile phones	0.812	0.842	0.845	0.894	0.679
	adve2	I display my favorite sports team merchandise on my desk at work or school	0.864				
	adve3	I give my favorite sports team related gift for birthday and holidays	0.793				
	adve4	I include my favorite sports team related information in my social media accounts	0.826				
Advocate	advo1	I try to convince others that my favorite sports team is superior to all others	0.845	0.888	0.896	0.923	0.750
	advo2	I refer to my favorite sports team as “WE” or “US”	0.907				
	advo3	I tell others about the great players on my favorite sports team	0.898				
	advo4	I engage in conversations with strangers about my favorite sports team	0.809				
Antagonize	anta1	I initiate communication with friend and family that are not fans of my favorite sports team after they lose	0.830	0.721	0.725	0.843	0.641
(continued)							

Table 1. Continued

Construct	Code	Measurement items	λ	α	CR (rho_a)	CR (rho_c)	AVE
Assimilate	anta2	I initiate communication with friend and family that are not fans of my favorite sports team after they win	0.772				
	anta3	I feel happy when friend and family that are not fans of my favorite sports team are unhappy after they lose	0.799				
				0.830	0.830	0.898	0.746
	assi1	I get together with a special group of friends and family to watch my favorite sports team games	0.851				
	assi2	I wear my favorite sports team merchandise on game day	0.871				
	assi3	I initiate communication with friend and family that are fans of my favorite sports team during games	0.869				

Source(s): Author's own work

respective construct as shown in Table 1. Additionally, convergent validity was further supported by AVE values exceeding 0.5 for all variables as shown in Table 1. Discriminant validity was assessed through the HTMT ratio and cross-loadings, with the HTMT ratio for all constructs falling below 0.85 (Roemer *et al.*, 2021), as shown in Table 2, which suggests satisfactory discriminant validity. Cross-loadings in Table 3 also indicated that each item loaded higher on its intended construct compared to others (Hair Jr *et al.*, 2017), further supporting discriminant validity. To address potential common method bias, which could arise since both independent and dependent variables were measured using the same approach, procedural controls were applied during the development of the questionnaire, measures, and data collection (Podasakoff *et al.*, 2003). Additionally, a statistical assessment was performed using Harman's single-factor test (Fuller *et al.*, 2016). The results showed that no single factor accounted for over 50% of the variance (Podasakoff *et al.*, 2003), suggesting that common method bias was not a concern in this study.

Structural model and parameter estimation

The structural model results show R^2 values for advertise, advocate, antagonize, assimilate, and sports team love as 0.209, 0.362, 0.191, 0.293, and 0.428, respectively, indicating moderate explanatory power for each construct (Cohen, 1988). Additionally, the f^2 values

Table 2. Discriminant validity using the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio

	ABSO	ADVE	ADVO	ANTA	ASSI	ATTE	STLO
ABSO							
ADVE	0.751						
ADVO	0.633	0.531					
ANTA	0.660	0.597	0.718				
ASSI	0.589	0.605	0.719	0.779			
ATTE	0.765	0.610	0.689	0.593	0.634		
STLO	0.560	0.521	0.665	0.540	0.624	0.694	

Source(s): Author's own work

Table 3. Cross loadings

	ABSO	ADVE	ADVO	ANTA	ASSI	ATTE	STLO
abso1	0.703	0.492	0.340	0.362	0.346	0.451	0.214
abso2	0.806	0.534	0.465	0.369	0.416	0.569	0.400
abso3	0.758	0.493	0.346	0.359	0.318	0.487	0.279
abso4	0.845	0.562	0.455	0.474	0.422	0.532	0.448
abso5	0.752	0.411	0.533	0.444	0.429	0.536	0.571
adve1	0.524	0.812	0.452	0.413	0.476	0.465	0.405
adve2	0.485	0.864	0.325	0.352	0.362	0.412	0.339
adve3	0.482	0.793	0.306	0.347	0.377	0.376	0.351
adve4	0.580	0.826	0.421	0.412	0.450	0.478	0.402
advo1	0.510	0.437	0.845	0.512	0.539	0.526	0.422
advo2	0.502	0.406	0.907	0.530	0.588	0.558	0.552
advo3	0.471	0.354	0.898	0.471	0.510	0.520	0.554
advo4	0.526	0.416	0.809	0.485	0.500	0.543	0.536
anta1	0.407	0.438	0.486	0.830	0.511	0.368	0.354
anta2	0.463	0.388	0.402	0.772	0.498	0.385	0.316
anta3	0.410	0.301	0.489	0.799	0.440	0.386	0.377
assi1	0.449	0.409	0.507	0.523	0.851	0.464	0.485
assi2	0.446	0.454	0.557	0.518	0.871	0.494	0.455
assi3	0.429	0.460	0.534	0.514	0.869	0.447	0.462
atte1	0.562	0.467	0.538	0.404	0.452	0.828	0.594
atte2	0.590	0.446	0.548	0.391	0.457	0.910	0.580
atte3	0.557	0.439	0.580	0.416	0.460	0.886	0.583
atte4	0.580	0.434	0.505	0.402	0.467	0.848	0.500
atte5	0.571	0.464	0.420	0.394	0.468	0.731	0.375
stlo1	0.501	0.423	0.534	0.383	0.490	0.547	0.853
stlo2	0.487	0.419	0.520	0.397	0.493	0.577	0.918
stlo3	0.438	0.380	0.567	0.379	0.507	0.566	0.911
stlo4	0.490	0.391	0.500	0.382	0.416	0.549	0.841

Source(s): Author's own work

reveal the following effect sizes: ABSO → STLO is 0.042, ATTE → STLO is 0.233, STLO → ADVE is 0.265, STLO → ADVO is 0.568, STLO → ANTA is 0.237, and STLO → ASSI is 0.415, indicating small to medium effects (Hair Jr et al., 2020). The Q² values for advertise, advocate, antagonize, assimilate, and sports team love are 0.266, 0.356, 0.215, 0.274, and 0.414, respectively, all above zero, which indicates good predictive relevance (Cohen, 1988). A bootstrapping technique with a 95% confidence interval was employed to test the hypothesized paths, with the results evaluated through standardized coefficients, t-statistics, and confidence intervals, as shown in Table 4. All hypotheses were supported, as indicated by the results in Table 4. Hypothesis 1, which proposed that ABSO → STLO, was supported with $\beta = 0.211$; $t > 1.96$, $p < 0.05$; CI = 0.067 to 0.363. Hypothesis 2, which proposed that ATTE → STLO, was supported with $\beta = 0.494$; $t > 1.96$, $p < 0.001$; CI = 0.320 to 0.639. Hypothesis 3, STLO → ADVE, was supported with $\beta = 0.458$; $t > 1.96$, $p < 0.001$; CI = 0.336 to 0.563. Hypothesis 4, proposing STLO → ADVO, was supported with $\beta = 0.602$; $t > 1.96$, $p < 0.001$; CI = 0.487 to 0.703. Hypothesis 5, proposing STLO → ANTA, was supported with $\beta = 0.437$; $t > 1.96$, $p < 0.001$; CI = 0.311 to 0.555. Lastly, Hypothesis 6, proposing STLO → ASSI, was supported with $\beta = 0.542$; $t > 1.96$, $p < 0.001$; CI = 0.399 to 0.659.

The mediation analysis results indicate support for Hypothesis 7a, which hypothesized that ATTE → STLO → ADVE, with $\beta = 0.226$; $t > 1.96$, $p < 0.001$; CI = 0.128 to 0.327. Additionally, Hypothesis 7b, which proposed ATTE → STLO → ADVO, was supported with $\beta = 0.297$; $t > 1.96$, $p < 0.001$; CI = 0.169 to 0.421, as shown in Table 4. Hypothesis 7c, proposing ATTE → STLO → ANTA, was also supported with $\beta = 0.216$; $t > 1.96$, $p < 0.001$;

Table 4. Testing of hypotheses

Hypotheses	Hypothesized paths	Standardized coefficient	t-statistics	95% confidence interval		Supported (YES or NO)
				Lower CI	Upper CI	
H1	Absorption → sports team love	0.211	2.777**	0.067	0.363	Yes
H2	Attention → sports team love	0.494	6.039***	0.320	0.639	Yes
H3	Sports team love → advertise	0.458	7.853***	0.336	0.563	Yes
H4	Sports team love → advocate	0.602	10.865***	0.487	0.703	Yes
H5	Sports team love → antagonize	0.437	7.085***	0.311	0.555	Yes
H6	Sports team love → assimilate	0.542	8.109***	0.399	0.659	Yes
H7a	Attention → sports team love → advertise	0.226	4.434***	0.128	0.327	Yes
H7b	Attention → sports team love → advocate	0.297	4.595***	0.169	0.421	Yes
H7c	Attention → sports team love → antagonize	0.216	4.225***	0.120	0.320	Yes
H7d	Attention → sports team love → assimilate	0.267	4.221***	0.145	0.390	Yes
H8a	Absorption → sports team love → advertise	0.096	2.459**	0.027	0.179	Yes
H8b	Absorption → sports team love → advocate	0.127	2.710**	0.038	0.221	Yes
H8c	Absorption → sports team love → antagonize	0.092	2.444**	0.025	0.173	Yes
H8d	Absorption → sports team love → assimilate	0.114	2.651**	0.033	0.201	Yes

Note(s): *** denotes p -value < 0.001 , ** denotes p -value < 0.05

Source(s): Author's own work

CI = 0.120 to 0.320, as presented in [Table 4. Hypothesis 7d](#), which stated ATTE → STLO → ASSI, was supported with $\beta = 0.267$; $t > 1.96$, $p < 0.001$; CI = 0.145 to 0.390. Further, [Hypothesis 8a](#), proposing ABSO → STLO → ADVE, was supported with $\beta = 0.096$; $t > 1.96$, $p < 0.05$; CI = 0.027 to 0.179, as shown in [Table 4. Hypothesis 8b](#), which hypothesized ABSO → STLO → ADVO, was supported with $\beta = 0.127$; $t > 1.96$, $p < 0.05$; CI = 0.038 to 0.221, as indicated in [Table 4](#). Additionally, [Hypothesis 8c](#), proposing ABSO → STLO → ANTA, was supported with $\beta = 0.092$; $t > 1.96$, $p < 0.05$; CI = 0.025 to 0.173, as shown in [Table 4](#). Lastly, [Hypothesis 8d](#), which proposed ABSO → STLO → ASSI, was supported with $\beta = 0.114$; $t > 1.96$, $p < 0.05$; CI = 0.033 to 0.201, as presented in [Table 4](#).

Discussion

The results of this study provide valuable insights into the predictive role of cognitive engagement in fostering “eFANGelism” among sports fans. The findings deepen theoretical understanding of how both cognitive absorption and attention drive various positive fan behaviors, including eFANGelism. The study revealed that cognitive engagement is essential for motivating fans to support their favorite teams by demonstrating and participating in positive behaviors. These results align with previous studies in sports marketing, which

emphasize fan engagement as a catalyst for positive outcomes, such as fan loyalty (Amani, 2019). Highly engaged fans are driven to support their teams through actions like purchasing merchandise, attending games, watching broadcasts, and making positive recommendations (Relationship, 2023). The findings indicate that fans who invest considerable time following news and updates about their teams are more likely to develop strong passion and commitment. Additionally, fans who cognitively focus on their teams are likely to cultivate deep loyalty and enthusiasm. Sports teams that strategically invest in enhancing cognitive attention and absorption can effectively capture and sustain fan interest (Amani, 2023). The results suggest that fans with high cognitive attention tend to show behaviors such as seeking information, developing in-depth knowledge about their teams, and following team stories and news. Furthermore, fans with high cognitive absorption tend to become fully immersed when engaging with content about their teams, dedicating significant time and deriving enjoyment from these interactions. This behavior fosters an emotional connection that can evolve into long-term passion and commitment (Büyükkakgöl *et al.*, 2022).

The results also indicate that love for a sports team is a driving force behind evangelistic behaviors among highly passionate and committed fans. Consistent with previous research in sports marketing, this love is identified as a source of various positive behaviors, including loyalty to the team (Daniels *et al.*, 2020; Wong and Hung, 2023). Specifically, love for the team fostered through cognitive attention and absorption serves as the foundation for fan passion and commitment, which in turn promote evangelistic behaviors. The findings suggest that highly passionate and committed fans actively advertise their team by wearing merchandise that signifies their affiliation and by sharing team-related news on social media platforms. This aligns with past studies showing that highly identified fans not only defend the team brand but also demonstrate support through merchandise purchases and stadium attendance (Amani, 2023; Pepur *et al.*, 2023). Additionally, the results indicate that passionate fans are willing to advocate for their team by enhancing its perceived superiority and protecting its corporate reputation. Previous research supports these findings, showing that team loyalty can inspire fans to take responsibility for promoting the team through positive recommendations. Furthermore, highly committed fans may defend the team's brand by engaging in oppositional behaviors toward rival teams and their supporters, as suggested by (Amani, 2019). This study also reveals that love for a sports team fosters a sense of community and assimilation, whereby passionate fans develop a strong identification with both the team and its fan communities.

Conclusion

This study provides substantial insights into the role of cognitive engagement in fostering eFANGelism among sports fans. The findings highlight the importance of engaging fans at a deeper cognitive level to strengthen their emotional connection with sports teams. Cognitive engagement has been identified as a key driver of eFANGelism, which serves as an integral mechanism for value co-creation in the sports industry, showcasing fans' active role in promoting their favorite teams. In the modern sports industry, eFANGelism aligns with recent transformations in sports management, particularly the formalization and commercialization of the sector globally, with notable growth in developing countries. From both theoretical and managerial perspectives, fostering cognitive engagement and sports team love is critical in cultivating a loyal and active fan base. This study contributes to advancing the discourse on fan engagement and its broader implications for the evolving sports industry.

Theoretical recommendations

Although evangelistic behavior has recently been highlighted by scholars as crucial for driving transformation in the sports industry, the literature has yet to document its antecedents and consequences. eFANGelism, which evolved from traditional evangelism, has limited evidence regarding its development in the sports marketing domain. Therefore, this study represents one

of the few efforts to examine the drivers of evangelistic behavior among sports fans theoretically. The aim is to spark interest among scholars in exploring the antecedents of eFANGelism among sports fans in developing countries. The study utilizes the S-O-R model to create a conceptual framework proposing that eFANGelism is driven by cognitive engagement, which is represented by absorption and attention. This research offers valuable insights into the factors influencing eFANGelism, thereby creating more opportunities for advancing knowledge of evangelistic behavior within the sports domain. It extends understanding by revealing that cognitive absorption motivates sports fans to develop passion and commitment towards their teams. Additionally, the findings indicate that cognitive attention serves as a catalyst that fuels the sense of passion and commitment toward sports teams. Furthermore, the study suggests that highly passionate and committed fans are consistently motivated to engage in evangelistic behavior, including advertising, advocacy, antagonism, and assimilation.

Managerial recommendations

The study's findings translate into actionable managerial recommendations, offering strategies for sports organization managers to engage fans in evangelistic behaviors that promote their teams. Specifically, the study recommends adopting a strategic approach to create an enabling environment where fans can actively participate in advocating for their sports team as brand ambassadors. To maximize fan engagement, it is essential that managers implement approaches that encourage fans to become fully immersed in and connected to their teams. The study highlights the importance for sports managers to invest in digital platforms, enabling fans to interact with their teams in meaningful ways. By fostering creativity and innovation in digital content, managers can enhance fans' cognitive engagement and focus on team-related content. Additionally, sports managers should ensure digital platforms feature news and stories crafted to capture fans' interest and sustain their attention. The digital content should be informative, entertaining, and educational to keep fans engaged. Moreover, the study suggests promoting fan memberships, allowing fans to participate in team-related decision-making, which can strengthen their sense of ownership and dedication. To achieve this, sports organizations should consider establishing membership systems that empower fans as partial owners, fostering their involvement in decisions impacting their favorite teams.

Possible limitation and future studies

Despite its significant contributions to sports marketing, this study has limitations that should be addressed. As a cross-sectional study, it cannot capture changes in sports fan behavior over time, opening up opportunities for future longitudinal studies that can track behavior using experimental designs. Conducted in Tanzania with fans of two major sports teams, Young Africans Sports Club and Simba Sports Club, the study provides an avenue for future research to include a broader range of teams and respondents for more generalizable findings. Since the respondents were primarily fans of these selected teams, future studies might consider incorporating more teams and diversifying the respondent pool. Additionally, future research could replicate this conceptual model in other countries in Africa and globally to test the robustness of the findings. Comparative studies could explore differences in fan behavior between developed and developing countries and assess factors such as gender and age. Moreover, modifications to the model could include control variables like age and gender or introduce mediators such as fan identification, community identification, and psychological ownership to expand on the drivers of "eFANGelism" in sports. Considering the multidimensional nature of engagement, future studies might also refine the model to include affective and behavioral engagement aspects. This quantitative study used a survey approach to collect and analyze data quantitatively; thus, a qualitative element is missing. A mixed-method approach could further enrich the discussion by incorporating qualitative insights into fan engagement in the sports domain. In other words, future studies should aim to

obtain a naturalistic understanding or deeper insights into the subject under investigation by adopting a qualitative approach.

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