

# Identification with team as a predictor of buying behaviours amongst South African Premier Soccer League (PSL) fans

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## Abstract

Sport fan consumer spend has traditionally been largely influenced by the level of identity with team that individuals experience. This being said, no empirical work was found to directly relate these concepts. Based on the customer engagement (CE) – and social identity theories, this research evaluated the role of identity with team as a predictor of positive buying behaviours amongst sport fans. The study included 735 adult fans of teams in the Professional Soccer League (PSL), South Africa's foremost commercial football league. A cross-sectional research design was implemented through self-report measures that participants were requested to complete. Statistical analysis through structural equation modelling was utilised to assess the postulated measurement models and to scrutinise the anticipated structural paths between the variables. Indirect effects were evaluated through mediation techniques. Results revealed a direct association between identity with team and fan engagement and specified fan engagement as an activator of the identity experience into buying behaviour. Findings are discussed and recommendations made.

**Keywords:** Identification with team; fan engagement; buying behaviours; customer engagement theory, social identity theory; football; South Africa

## Introduction

In South Africa, a clear narrative exists insofar the communal value derived from sport by fans is concerned (Cornelissen, Bob, & Swart, 2011). In fact, the social currency generated by sport in the country has largely inspired this constituency of consumers to sustain their spend in the commercial properties of the industry, resulting in sport maintaining its position as a resilient and buoyant part of the national tourism and leisure sector – despite challenging macro-economic conditions (Baller, 2015; Giampiccoli, Lee, & Nauright, 2015; Koenderman, 2013). For example, PricewaterhouseCoopers (2015) has estimated that the commercial value of sport in South Africa will amount to a total annual revenue of more than R19,5 billion by 2017. Chan (2010) has projected that the business of sport is responsible for 2% of the total gross domestic product (GDP) of the country. Sport plays a prolific role in generating value and providing employment through its various commerce branches, such as events management, media and hospitality, merchandise production, distribution and infrastructure development (Bing, Miao, ZiWen, XueFeng, Lu & Feng, 2015; KPMG, 2014). In light of the current economic realities in the country, the role of the sport industry is of paramount importance, as it creates employment, stimulates investment and generally grows the economy through its high levels of consumer spend. The pace-setting sport in this

regard locally has been football (known synonymously as soccer). Saayman and Rossouw (2008) comment that 54% of the entire adult population in South Africa actively consume football, through supporting a favourite professional team, following the general progress of the sport or investing resources (either timeous or financial) in products related to it. The Department of Sport and Recreation (2014) has also highlighted that the sport is by far the most popular in the country, both from a consumption and participation perspective. As a result of this, the business of football has flourished, attracting major sponsorship to particularly its flagship commercial product, the Professional Soccer League (PSL); from large corporations such as Absa, Nedbank, Vodacom and MTN, amongst others (Adonis, 2011; Onwumechili & Akindes, 2014).

Stander and Van Zyl (2016), as well as Koortzen and Oosthuizen (2012) have argued that South African football has enjoyed unremitting commercial growth in recent years due to the tacit emotional connection that exists between fans and their favourite PSL teams. These fans are heavily invested in the success of these teams and in some instances experience the triumphs and tribulations of its players as a direct reflection of their own identity (Burnett & Wessels, 2012; Cohen & Avrahami, 2005). Trail (2012:4) has stated that fans are interested in “finding a diversion from work and the normal, unexciting activity of everyday life”, and therefore engross themselves into the activities of their favourite teams in an effort to elevate their psychological experiences. Fans find meaning in the support of football teams as it provides them with a feeling of community with other people, reflects their higher aspirations for success and generally offers them the perception of purpose and direction (Auh, Bell, McLeod, & Shih, 2007; Brodie, Hollebeek, Juric, & Ilic, 2011). Fans often feel they can express their own personality through engaging in consumption of activities of their favourite football team and seek comfort for their affiliation needs through subscribing to the culture and ethos of such team (Smith & Stewart, 2007; Trail & James, 2001).

It is clear that fans strengthen and express their own unique identity through their favourite sport (football) teams. Through the extensive availability of literature, it is also clear that scholars kindle amongst them the shared notion that such establishment of sport fan identity plays a significant role in channelling consumer investment in the business of sport. However, no studies were found that directly relates identity with team as a source of positive buying behaviours amongst fans. Moreover, no studies exist insofar practical strategies to translate identity with team to buying behaviour are concerned. The aim of this paper is thus to establish whether identity with team will predict positive consumer buying behaviours, and to gauge whether fan engagement strategies can be used to leverage and strengthen this relationship. This is done in the context of South African football.

### **Conceptualising identity with sport team**

Throughout the history of sport marketing literature and consumer theory, authors have been in consensus that the sport consumption decision has not been a transactional one, but a transformative experience informed by the emotive connection that exists between the identity of fans and their favourite teams. For example, Heere and James (2007) have articulated that the strong bond between sport fan and team is inspired by the perception of connectedness that the fan experiences. Identity with sport team has been defined by Potter and Keene (2012:349) as “psychological attachment or oneness with a sports team”. When evaluating which team to support, the fan compares the culture, ethos and values of that club with his/ her own unique traits and characteristics (Raney, 2006). When there is accord between these variables, that fan is likely to be emotionally invested in the team itself and will display positive behaviours geared towards the interest of the team. Wann and Branscombe (1993) have clustered fans as being either low, moderate or high in their identification with a team and argue that a fan who expresses greater association between identity and team will be more inclined to support that team – both from an emotional and

financial perspective. This view is echoed by Rees, Haslam, Coffee and Lavalley (2015), who argue that fans establish a social identity for themselves through their support of their favourite team, and define their identity in relation to other people who share this interest. Fans find their preferred sport teams to be a representation of themselves (Wilson, Grieve, Ostrowski, Mienaltowski, & Cyr, 2013) and derive value from this identity, manifested in such outcomes as psychological well-being (Branscombe & Wann, 1991), intrinsic psychological reward (Stander & Van Zyl, 2016), heightened self-esteem (Wann, Grieve, Visek, Partridge, & Lanter, 2012) and the experience of positive affect (Samra & Wos, 2014). Trail and James (2001) comment that fans often satisfy their vicarious achievement needs through their identity with a particular team. Clearly, identification with team is a prominent influencer of the sport consumption decision amongst fans and a fundamental motivator of positive consumer behaviours. However, empirical knowledge is required on the effect of identity with team on specific buying actions of fans.

### **Identity with sport team and buying behaviours**

Because of the emotive nature of sport consumption, it is often said that fans consider not only the cognitive evaluation of the value of the products of their favourite teams, but more so the affective component associated with their purchase. Swanson, Gwinner, Larson, and Janda (2003) argue that sport fans who have vested emotional interests in their preferred teams are likely to exhibit behaviours that promote the interests of the team club/ province. This may include purchasing the official merchandise and clothing of that team, consuming media that reports on the team's progress and frequenting the stadium to attend games of that team (Swanson *et al.*, 2003). Early evidence in the literature has suggested that this affective inclination led to the experience of intrinsic reward derived by fans, as they perceive these consumer and purchasing behaviours as a reaffirmation and advancement of their identity (Trail & James, 2001; Wann *et al.*, 2012). This being said, empirical work that directly associate identity with team with purchasing behaviours are limited and exploration of a model to this effect is much needed.

Two theoretical foundations inform the postulation that identity with team will predict buying behaviours amongst sport fans. Firstly, the consumer model of Hawkins, Best, and Coney (1998), which is an extension of customer engagement (CE) theory, argues that a consumer appraises both the cognitive (rational/ clear) and affective (emotional/ internal rewarding) value that is on offer when he/ she considers the purchase/ consumption of a product. The cognitive evaluation processes relate to the immediate value the product can deliver to the consumer and is usually linked to the satisfying of some immediate need that is cerebrally processed and known to that consumer. The affective process, however, is fairly more complex and subjective, as it is concerned with the comparison of the product value with that of the consumer's own identity, values and belief systems. Should there be dissonance between these subjective predispositions of the consumer and the product, an ensuing purchasing behaviour is highly unlikely (Brodie *et al.*, 2011; Hawkins *et al.*, 1998). However, the opposite is also true, and if alignment between product and personal values is experienced, buying behaviours should increase (Swanson *et al.*, 2003). I.e., in the case of this study, and based on the model of Hawkins *et al.* (1998), it is plausible to argue that identity with team, an affective and deeply subjective and internal emotive experience of a sport fan, should predict positive consumer behaviours.

The second theoretical departure point is the social identity theory of Tajfel and Turner (1979), which argues that human beings derive value from being part of a particular community of people and perceive their "membership" or ascription to such community as indicative of their worth in society. When high social identity exists in the subjective reality of the person, that person will display behaviours that are geared towards the interests of the group he/ she belong to (Trepte, 2006). Furthering this to the domain of the sports fan, it is

plausible to argue that identity with team is not experienced in isolation, but is directly influenced by the ecology of the fan's favourite team, which constitutes of the entirety of activities that reflect the team's culture, ethos and values. In simple terms, identity with team is experienced in the context of all the team's activities. When identity is enhanced through these activities, the fan should display behaviours that promote the interests of the team, such as purchasing product (Tajfel & Turner 1979; Yoshida, Gordon, James, & Heere, 2015).

### **The relationship between identity with team and buying behaviours through fan engagement**

The second broad objective of this research is to investigate whether practical strategies could be implemented to leverage the relationship between identity with team and buying behaviours. If one argues that identity with team influences the fan's decision to purchase product, it is important to put forward practical suggestions to ensure this translation does occur. In this study, we propose fan engagement as such mediator. The term "sport fan engagement" was conceptualised by Yoshida, Gordon, Nakazawa, and Biscaia (2014); who realised that the vigorous growth of the global sports industry necessitated a dimensional understanding of the factors that absorb fans into the activities of their favourite team, and, more importantly, their subsequent decision to purchase products of that team. Fan engagement is described by these authors as a reflection of standard customer engagement, albeit sport specific. They refer to the engagement experience as "a consumer's spontaneous, interactive and co-creative behaviours primarily in consumer-company exchanges to achieve his or her individual and social purposes" (2014:400). An engaged sports fan is someone who is actively engrossed into the activities of his/ her favourite team, sacrifices timeous and financial resources to support that team and seeks ways to promote the interests of such team (Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001).

Yoshida *et al.* (2014) outline three dimensions that, together, constitute sport fan engagement. Firstly, *management cooperation* refers to fans' willingness to participate constructively in the management of their favourite sport teams. It is reflected in a multitude of behaviours; including but not limited to giving management feedback on the way the team is run, exhibiting behaviours that can be considered as promoting the team's values and participating in specially organised team events and occasions (Doherty, 2013). *Prosocial behaviour* describes fans' inclination to interact with others insofar their teams are concerned. It refers to the networks of fans of the same sport team which are formed in an effort to converse on key events and proceedings (Auh *et al.*, 2007). It has dramatically increased in significance in recent years due to the availability of social media platforms that allow fans to interact digitally with each other. Finally, *performance tolerance* is indicative of fans' engagement levels in loyalty terms, and comprises positive demonstrated behaviours such as wearing official team apparel or going to the stadium regardless of whether the team performs well or not (Kanosue, Oshimi, Harada, & Kogiso, 2015; Yoshida *et al.*, 2014).

As a whole, the dimensions of sport fan engagement mirror the totality of a fan's engrossment with the brand, tenet and ideologies of a particular team (Allison, 2013; Funk, Beaton, & Alexandris, 2012). It is this engrossment that drives consumer behaviour, as an engaged fan will immerse him/herself in the promotion of his/ her favourite sport team's interests (Humphries & Smith, 2006). As such, fan engagement is a key driver of buying behaviours and is subsequently pursued actively by the management entities of major sport teams around the world (Stander & De Beer, 2016; Yoshida *et al.*, 2014). This has led fan engagement to become an actively researched phenomenon, because scholars and practitioners alike realise that, by leveraging fan engagement, investment in sport consumer products will increase, which in turn can further bolster the already economically flourishing sports industry.

In this research, the effect of sport fan engagement in the relationship between identity with team and buying behaviours is scrutinised. Three postulations are made. Firstly, it is proposed that identity with team will directly relate to fan engagement. Secondly, it is proposed that fan engagement should lead to buying behaviour amongst sport fans. Thirdly, it is advanced that fan engagement will mediate the relationship between identity with team and buying behaviours. Theoretical explanation for these proposed relationships are found in the broaden-and-build theory of Frederickson (2002). This theory holds that, when the performance of a certain activity inspires emotional reward within a person, that individual will seek to repetitively engage in that activity, in a positive spiral of thought-action repertoires that could lead to potential sustainable well-being patterns.

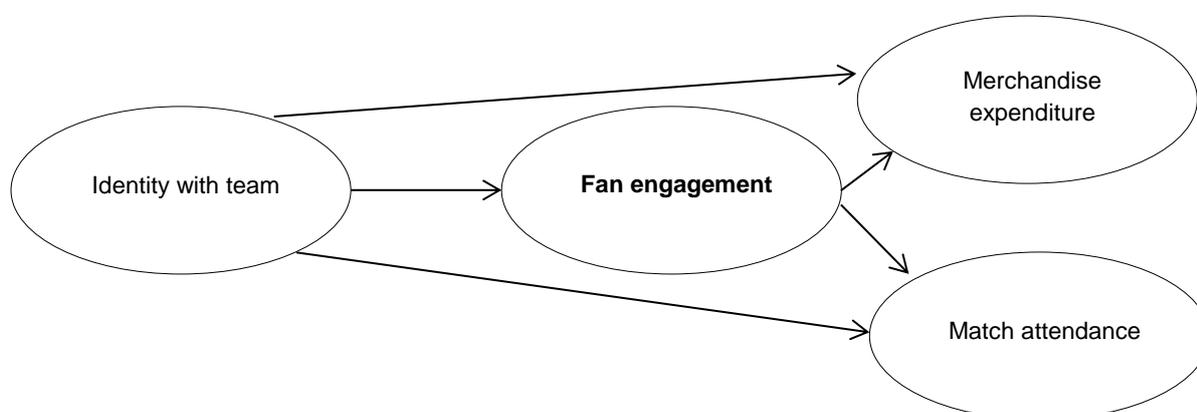
When considering that identity with team has been associated with such positive experiences as self-esteem (Wann *et al.*, 2012) and meaningful life existence (Stander & Van Zyl, 2016), it becomes evident that fans who experience high levels of identity with their favourite teams will be likely to express the behaviours constituted in the dimensions of fan engagement as put forward by Yoshida *et al.* (2014). Manifestly, engaged fans are also likely to directly increase their consumer spend on products related to their favourite team, as these products will appeal to the affective component as outlined in the model of Hawkins *et al.*(1998). Pragmatically, and as a last sub-objective of the second overall aim of this paper, it is proposed that fan engagement will translate identity with team to higher levels of buying behaviour amongst fans. When a fan experiences his/ her identity as strengthened through the support of his/ her team, that fan is likely to be more engaged with the culture and ethos of that team and should likely enhance consumer spend in team-related merchandise and products in a positive thought-action repertoires (buying behaviours); as per Frederickson (2002) theory.

## Hypotheses

The aim of this paper is to establish whether identity with team will predict positive consumer buying behaviours, and to determine whether fan engagement strategies can be used to leverage and strengthen this relationship. Based on the theoretical foundations and literature outlined above this paper argues that:

- H1:** Identity with team is associated with buying behaviours amongst sport fans.
- H2:** Identity with team is associated with fan engagement.
- H3:** Fan engagement is associated with buying behaviours amongst sport fans.
- H4:** Fan engagement mediates the relationship between identity with team and buying behaviours amongst sport fans.

**Figure 1** below specifies the research model<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> The variables “merchandise expenditure” and “match attendance” together relate to buying behaviours, please refer to “Research Instruments” section below.

## Methodology

### Study sample

Participants to the study were 735 adult South African football fans in the Premier Soccer League (PSL), the country's largest professionally organised football competition and one of the most lucrative and financially strongest football leagues in the world (Gedye, 2007; KickOff, 2011). It was argued that football provided a useful context to conduct the research, as it is South Africa's most popular consumer sport (Department of Sport and Recreation, 2014; Saayman & Rossouw, 2008) and is experiencing sustained and buoyant commercial growth. The mean age of the participants was 34.67 (SD = 10.32). Table 1 below describes a further demographic profile of the participants to the study.

**Table 1: Characteristics of the participants**

Item	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	493	70.30
	Female	208	29.70
Home language	English	48	6.90
	Xitsonga	38	5.50
	Tshivenda	33	4.80
	Afrikaans	23	3.30
	isiZulu	158	22.80
	siSwati	9	1.30
	Setswana	73	10.50
	Sesotho	178	25.70
	Sepedi	73	10.50
	isiXhosa	50	7.20
Education	isiNdebele	6	0.9
	Other	3	0.40
	Less than matric	176	29.60
	Matric	276	46.50
	Degree	88	14.80
Spending	Post-graduate degree	53	8.90
	Less than R 1000 per year	241	35.20
	> R 1000 but < R 2000 per year	199	29.10
Match attendance	More than R 2000 per year	240	35.00
	One match per year	43	6.20
	Two matches per year	64	9.30
	Three matches per year	53	7.70
	Four or more matches per year	530	76.80

Note: Where totals do not add up it is due to missing values

### Research approach and procedure

A quantitative research approach was followed, making use of a cross-sectional design. This implies that the responses of a large number of participants were recorded at a particular point in time (Salkind, 2009). The research was conducted throughout various matches of the 2015 PSL season; during premier league team fixtures. Formal permission was obtained from a leading South African premier league football club, based in Gauteng province, to conduct the research at their team's home matches, at their home stadium. A research station was set up at the stadium and the research process was conducted before -, during half time and after matches. Respondents were approached and invited to participate in the research.

The aim, nature of and purpose of the research was explained to participants. Participants were informed of the voluntary nature of their participation, the confidentiality of their responses and the fact that they could withdraw from the research process at any time. This was also explained clearly in an informed consent letter, which participants were requested to study and sign, in the case of them deciding to participate in the research.

## Research instruments

**Identity with sport team:** Identity with team was measured by the *South African Psychological Ownership Scale* (SAPOS; Olckers & Du Plessis, 2012), and in particular by the 6 items reflecting “identity with organisation”. The SAPOS is designed to assess the level of assonance that exists between a specific organisation/ community and an individual member of that organisation, i.e. the level of identity that such member experiences with his/ her chosen organisation. The instrument was slightly adapted to ensure specificity to a sport consumer setting. An example item is “I feel that my personal values and that of my sport team are aligned”. The instrument is scored on a six-point Likert scale; responses varying from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. The SAPOS has been established as a valid and reliable measure in a number of studies, with a recent evaluation revealing internal consistency of 0.94 through Cronbach alpha values (Olckers, 2013).

**Buying behaviours:** Purchasing behaviours of participants were assessed by utilising a biographical questionnaire that considered the regularity with which fans conducted a specific buying action geared towards their favourite team’s interests. Two actions were considered. Firstly, stadium match attendance was enquired, i.e. how frequently the fans under investigation attended matches of their favourite team, at the stadium. Ross (2006) has reflected that stadium match attendance is a central indicator of the social currency that a professional sport team enjoys and that large numbers at matches displays the popularity of a team. Secondly, expenditure on team merchandise (such as the football team’s official clothes and memorabilia) was considered. According to Martin (2013), sport consumers’ decision to purchase licensed team products and merchandise has evolved the sports industry into a cross-sectorial business, comprising elements of tourism, leisure and retail. Together, stadium match attendance and merchandise expenditure form key growth engines for the business of sport in totality. A four-point frequency scale was used to assess stadium match attendance, probing participants to gauge whether they attend *1 game per year*, *2 games per year*, *3 games per year*, or *4 or more games per year*. Merchandise expenditure was evaluated through a three-point ordinal scale. Partakers were queried to indicate the amount (in rand) that they spend annually on the merchandise of their favourite football team. Potential responses included *less than R1000 per year*, *more than R1000 but less than R2000 per year* and *R2000 or more per year*.

**Fan engagement:** Fan engagement was measured through the *Fan Engagement Scale* (FES; Yoshida *et al.*, 2014). The FES comprises 9 items, with three items for every one factor of fan engagement. It is scored on a seven-point Likert type scales with responses ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Example items include, for management cooperation: “I do things to make my team’s event management easier”. For prosocial behaviour: “I often interact with other fans to talk about issues related to my team”. For performance tolerance: “I wear apparel which represents the fans of my team even if the team has an unsuccessful season”. Internal consistency for the original FES has been revealed as  $\alpha = 0.86$  (Yoshida *et al.*, 2014). In a South African context, Stander and De Beer (2016) established sufficient internal consistency of  $\alpha = 0.85$ ,  $\alpha = 0.70$  and  $\alpha = 0.90$  for management support, prosocial behaviour and performance tolerance, respectively.

## Statistical analysis

Structural equation modelling methods were implemented with Mplus 7.4 (Muthén & Muthén, 2015). Firstly, measurement models were competed within a confirmatory factor analysis framework for the latent variables to ascertain the best-fitting factor structure for fan engagement, i.e. a one-factor, three-factor or a second-order factor solution (Brown, 2015). For the model fit, the comparative fit index (CFI) and Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) were considered with acceptable values from 0.90 and above, the root mean square error of

approximation (RMSEA) with a value of 0.08 and below indicating acceptable fit, and then the Akaike information criterion (AIC) and Bayesian information criterion with the lowest value indicating best fit (Van de Schoot, Lugtig, & Hox, 2012). The advantage of a second-order factor for fan engagement would be that the unique variance from all three fan engagement components would be captured in a single latent variable for structural analysis, and the individual components would also be available in the correlation matrix for interpretation. Effect size considerations for the correlations were 0.30-0.49 as medium, 0.50 and above as large (Cohen, 1992). Cronbach's alpha coefficients were also calculated for the multi-item factors, i.e. identity with team and the fan engagement constructs.

Then based on the best-fitting measurement a model, a structural model was specified according to the hypotheses with the two buying behaviours added to the model and specified as categorical variables. To this end maximum likelihood estimation with categorical outcome data was used in Mplus. This estimation process is complex due to the increased number of integration points, but also more accurate given the type of data. Indirect effects were also estimated with the bootstrapping method to investigate the potential mediation effects in the model (Rucker, Preacher, Tormala, & Petty, 2011), but the minimum of 1000 draws (Hayes, 2009) were specified due to the complexity of model estimation, i.e. the 1000 draws took seven hours to estimate with this method even with the use of four logical core processors from the computer. These indirect effects would be considered significant if the 95% confidence interval for the estimates did not cross zero.

## Results

### Assessing measurement models

**Table 2: The competed measurement models**

Model	df	$\chi^2$	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	AIC	BIC
1: One-factor	89	1011.83	0.86	0.84	0.120	28620.45	28831.35
2: Three-factor	84	462.547	0.95	0.94	0.075	28045.17	28278.99
3: Second-order factor	86	429.133	0.95	0.94	0.074	28043.75	28268.41

Notes: df = degrees of freedom; CFI = Comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis index; RMSEA = Root mean square error of approximation; AIC = Akaike Information Criterion; BIC = Bayesian Information Criterion

As can be seen in Table 2, the results from the CFA showed that the one-factor model did not fit the data well and was an inferior model (CFI = 0.86; TLI = 0.84; RMSEA = 0.120; AIC = 28260.45; BIC = 28831.35). However, both the three-factor and second-order factor models fitted the data well. When giving preference to the chi-square, AIC and BIC values, the second-order model was in fact a superior model compared to the other models (CFI = 0.95; TLI = 0.94; RMSEA = 0.074; AIC = 28043.75; BIC = 28268.41). This model was then used to continue with the structural model in line with the research hypotheses and methodology explained above.

### Factor loadings and correlation matrix for latent variables

**Table 3. Factor loadings for the second-order measurement model of fan engagement**

Latent variable	Item	Standardised Loading	Standard Error	p-Value
Fan engagement	MC	0.80	0.02	0.001
	PSB	0.94	0.02	0.001
	PT	0.82	0.02	0.001
MC	Eng1	0.78	0.02	0.001
	Eng2	0.81	0.02	0.001
	Eng3	0.83	0.02	0.001
PSB	Eng4	0.78	0.01	0.001
	Eng5	0.81	0.01	0.001
	Eng6	0.53	0.03	0.001
PT	Eng7	0.87	0.01	0.001
	Eng8	0.89	0.01	0.001
	Eng9	0.85	0.01	0.001

Notes: All two-tailed p values  $\leq 0.001$ ; MC = Management cooperation; PSB = Prosocial behaviour; PT = Performance tolerance; Eng = Separate items for fan engagement factors

The factor loadings in Table 3 indicate that all items loaded sufficiently on their respective factors, i.e. all factor loadings were above the general rule of thumb of 0.50 or above (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006). Indeed, the majority of loadings were above 0.75 with standard errors that were small indicating accuracy in estimation of the loadings.

**Table 4: Correlation matrix for the latent variables**

Variable	<i>r</i>						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Identity with team	1.00						
2. MC	0.60**	1.00					
3. PSB	0.69**	0.75**	1.00				
4. PT	0.61**	0.66**	0.77**	1.00			
5. Fan engagement	0.74**	0.80**	0.93**	0.82**	1.00		
6. Spending	0.37*	0.36*	0.41*	0.36*	0.44*	1.00	
7. Attendance	0.27	0.28	0.33*	0.29	0.35*	0.16	1.00

Notes: All correlations statistically significant; \* = medium effect; \*\* = large effect

As can be seen from the correlation matrix, identity with team was positively correlated with all of the study variables, and most highly with fan engagement ( $r = 0.74$ ; large effect). Furthermore, the individual components of fan engagement were highly correlated with the second-order fan engagement construct and with each other, supporting the decision to create a second-order factor – which would also offset concerns of multicollinearity (high correlations) when used in the structural model. Fan engagement was positively correlated with spending ( $r = 0.44$ ; medium effect) and attendance ( $r = 0.35$ ; medium effect).

## Regression and indirect paths of the structural model

**Table 5: Regression paths of the structural model**

Regression relationships	Standardised Estimate	Standard Error	p
Identity with team → Fan engagement	0.74	0.04	0.001
Identity with team → Spending	0.09	0.10	0.360
Identity with team → Attendance	0.01	0.11	0.907
Fan engagement → Spending	0.38	0.11	0.001
Fan engagement → Attendance	0.34	0.12	0.004

Table 5 shows that identity with team had a direct relationship to fan engagement ( $\beta = 0.74$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), but did not have a significant direct relationship to either spending ( $p = 0.360$ ) or attendance ( $p = 0.907$ ). However, fan engagement did have a significant positive relation to both spending ( $\beta = 0.38$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) and attendance ( $\beta = 0.34$ ,  $SE = 0.12$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ).

**Table 6: Indirect effects of the structural research model**

Variable	Estimate	p	95% CI	
IWT → Fan engagement → Spending	0.28	0.001	0.14	0.49
IWT → Fan engagement → Attendance	0.25	0.007	0.09	0.48

Notes:  $p < 0.001$ ; CI = Confidence interval; IWT = Identity with team

In terms of the mediating, i.e. indirect effects, it was already shown that the direct relationships from identity with work to spending and attendance were not significant. However, bootstrapping resampling showed that both the indirect effect were significant, i.e. did not cross (include) zero – see Table 6 above. This indicated an indirect-only mediation model (Zhao, Lynch, & Chen, 2010), which implied that the relationship from identity with team to spending and attendance only exists through fan engagement.

## Discussion

This research had two broad objectives. Firstly, it was concerned with whether identity with team could predict positive buying behaviours amongst sport fans. Potter and Keene (2012) have articulated the centrality of an individual fan's perception that his/ her own values and that of his/ her favourite sport team is aligned as it relates to the buying decision of these fans. In the literature it was supported that, based on the affective result that engrossment with a team has on the sport spectator, that individual is likely to display favourable behaviours geared towards promoting the interests of the team (Swanson *et al.*, 2003). The second broad objective of the research was related to pragmatic strategies that could effectively translate the identity with team experience of the fan into positive buying behaviours, by leveraging of the concept known as 'fan engagement' put forward by Yoshida *et al.* (2014). Based on the model of Hawkins *et al.* (1998), this paper argued that engaged fans is more likely to convert their experience of high team identity to buying behaviours such as merchandise expenditure and match attendance; due to the emotional undertones that facilitate purchasing actions. Specifically, the paper postulated that identity with team will predict buying behaviours, will lead to higher fan engagement and will strengthen purchasing behaviours through fan engagement. It was also argued that fan engagement will directly relate to buying behaviours.

Interestingly, in terms of the results, Hypothesis 1, which related identity with team to buying behaviours, could not be conclusively proven, not insofar merchandise expenditure or match

attendance were concerned. This indicates that identity with team, although an important and relevant subjective experience (and correlated with buying behaviours as indicated in the results of this study), on its own would likely not generate the positive buying decisions that the management teams of large professional sporting entities require to grow their brands and contribute to the economy. However, when the concept of fan engagement was introduced to the research model, interesting results emerged. This was illustrated through support for Hypothesis 2 (identity with team is related to fan engagement), Hypothesis 3 (fan engagement predicts buying behaviours) and Hypothesis 4 (fan engagement will mediate between identity with team and buying behaviours); all of which results were positive through statistical analysis. It is indicative to the fact that fan engagement represents a prominent and significant concept as far as strategies for expenditure amongst fans are considered.

Although support was not found for Hypothesis 1, the importance of identity with team can by no means be disregarded, as this study indicated that it may well lead to higher levels of fan engagement in a direct relationship. On its turn, the fan engagement component also predicted buying behaviours, and translated identity with team to buying behaviours, namely merchandise expenditure and match attendance, both crucial components of the commercial development of professional clubs and ultimately the growth of the sports industry as a whole (Martin, 2013). In many ways, the fan engagement experience could thus be described as an activator of the emotionally inclined and well established personal identity alignment that sport fans share with their teams; ensuring that this alignment does not only remain a positive subjective experience of the fan but actually leads to club – and industry growing purchasing actions.

### **Pragmatic buying strategies through fan engagement**

Hypotheses 2 through 4 were proven in this research. This highlights the critical importance of fan engagement in a) the identity with team experience of the sport fan but also b) as relates to the purchasing decision of these fans; and answers to the second broad objective of this study. When considering the importance of practical strategies through fan engagement, it is important to consider all three dimensions of the concept as alluded to by Yoshida *et al.* (2014).

#### *Management cooperation*

The first dimension of sport fan engagement is management cooperation and refers to the level of input to and involvement a fan has with his/ her favourite sports team (Yoshida *et al.*, 2014). Doherty (2013) refers to it as the level of participation that fans are willing to have in activities that promote their clubs'/ teams' interests. From a practical point of view, and considering the results of this study, professional teams' are encouraged to actively promote interventions that enhances the platform of fans to partake in the strategic and operational decisions of their favourite sport teams. For example, fans can be provided with an active say in selection of players to represent the team, or could be provided with forums where they can give considered feedback to the club/ team based on managerial decisions made (including but not limited to new player signings, playing of friendly matches or selecting venues for fan activation sessions). Further to this, and relating specifically to the identity with team dimension, fans may be provided with the opportunity to have a say in the design and colours of the team jersey and attire, as this is a direct reflection of the preferences of the team's fans and could be a very personal way of motivating fans to purchase product. Finally, it is encouraged that fans be made a stronger part of the decision making process in general, for example by being represented on board level in the management structures of professional sport clubs/ teams. This can be done through formal structures such as regional supporters' branches, something that major football clubs around the world in particular have used fruitfully in the past. By involving fans more, clubs and teams can heighten their levels

of engagement and may stimulate enhanced investment in the commercial offerings of the team.

#### *Prosocial behaviour*

Yoshida *et al.* (2014) describe prosocial behaviour as the fan engagement dimension that describes fans' need for interacting and socialising with each other. Auh *et al.* (2007) refer to it as conversation networks that fans form with each other. Prosocial behaviour can be enhanced by ensuring fans have more opportunity to interact with each other. In this instance, the role of digital and social media platforms have dramatically shifted the conversation landscape (Shank & Lyberger, 2014). By making use of such platforms such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*, fans can communicate on key events and proceedings of their favourite team in real time, and through this feel an integral part of the broader community of fans. Further to this, in-person prosocial behaviour platforms, such as the formal organising of supporters' branches, could further promote the engagement experience. Zagnoli and Radicchi (2009) describe supporters' branches as a vehicle for loyal fans who seek to engage in value co-creation with the management teams of their favourite sport clubs/teams. In this instance, and supported through the results of the study, a strong case exists for making use of prosocial behaviour interventions to promote the buying decision amongst fans, and translate the team identity experience into these actions.

#### *Performance tolerance*

The final dimension of fan engagement is performance tolerance and refers to the level of loyalty fans exhibit in their support of their team (Yoshida *et al.*, 2014). Clear behaviours can be observed insofar performance tolerance is concerned and may include wearing team apparel even if the team is having an unsuccessful season, or returning to the stadium during periods where the team is not performing well (Kanosue *et al.*, 2015). Pragmatic strategies geared towards performance tolerance must be inclined to reward the loyalty of fans. This can include positive interventions towards fans that have supported the team for a long period of time, or designing loyalty programmes that are aimed at allowing fans to build up a "portfolio" of purchases of products related to the team over time. Fans can also be rewarded with cash back rewards if they purchase team merchandise over a prolonged period of time, or may get discount on match tickets if they are season-ticket holders to the team's home stadium. These are the active promotions management teams can introduce to encourage performance tolerance, which in turn can inspire enhanced purchasing of team-related products.

### **Limitations, recommendations, contribution and conclusion**

#### **Limitations**

The study was not without limitations. A cross-sectional design was utilised, which poses the risk of common-method bias (Salkind, 2009). The study was conducted in the context of South African professional football, which was chosen based on its status as being the country's foremost consumer sport. However, it excludes results from other major consumer sports in the country, such as rugby and cricket. The study incorporated a sample of wide demographic representation, but did not consider the unique experiences of demographic clusters/ groups in the sample, rather studying the responses of the population in entirety. The suggestions for practical strategies were based on the fan engagement dimensions of Yoshida *et al.* (2014) but should be subjected to further scientific scrutiny to ensure its validity of application.

### **Recommendations for future research**

In future, research on the identity with team, fan engagement and purchasing behaviour dimensions of other popular South African sport types must be considered. This will ensure that the findings of this study are compared to and validated through different contexts. It is also advised to make use of a longitudinal design in future, as neither identity with team nor fan engagement is static concepts, but dynamic over time. In terms of the two broad objectives of this research, it is proposed that identity with team is further scrutinised as a driver of consumer behaviours in sport marketing contexts, as the established customer engagement theories and literature outlined it as an important part of the customer buying decision; an aspect which could not be proven in isolation of fan engagement in this research. More robust empirical work is thus required on this level. From the perspective of the second broad research objective and relating to pragmatic strategies through fan engagement, the authors proposed various interventions based on the engagement dimensions as put forward by Yoshida *et al.* (2014). This was informed by the statistical findings of this paper, but should be further assessed to ensure scientific rigour and applicability in the realm of sport consumerism. In this regard, great future research possibilities exist.

### **Contribution and conclusion**

The study made a contribution both from an empirical and pragmatic perspective. Firstly, it was the first known study to scientifically relate identity with the team of sport fans directly to positive buying behaviours. It was also the first study to examine the role of fan engagement in this relationship. By scrutinising the psychometric properties of the measurement model, important scientific foundational work is laid for the further exploration of both identity with team and fan engagement in new – and other sport contexts. From a pragmatic point of view, the study established the important role of fan engagement, directly to buying behaviours as well as indirectly from identity with team. In this instance, important practical suggestions were put forward that must now be further evaluated.

In terms of South African sport, and specifically in view of football, the country's foremost sport and the context for this study, this paper made an important contribution in understanding the potential role of particularly fan engagement in translating the identity with team experience of fans into tangible and positive buying behaviours. This is much needed, as the sports industry, which remains a buoyant contributor to the national tourism and leisure sector, must be nurtured and further stimulated to ensure sustained consumer spend. This will ensure job creation and ultimately, economic growth – a key national priority.

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