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contribution to loyalty toward football

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Abstract

Purpose: In the current era of fake news, illusions, manipulations, and other artificial attributes of virtuality and reality, authenticity is a virtue that people highly appreciate. This study examines the influence of the personal brand authenticity of top football players on loyalty to the football discipline in general, via the mediation of personal brand identification.

Design: Based on data collected from a convenience sample of 562 respondents from Poland via an electronic survey and analyzed using the structural equation modeling method this study explored, first, the influence of top football players' personal brand authenticity on consumers' identification with these football players, and second, how this identification may lead to enhancing loyalty to the football discipline. Finally, it verified how the loyalty effect (attitudinal and behavioral) varies across different categories of spectators.

Originality: This study presents evidence that the personal authenticity of football celebrities to measure loyalty to the football discipline in general, as mediated by personal brand identification. Moreover, this study proves that the loyalty to football driven by the personal brand authenticity of football stars differs between spectators' categories, and it differs from the loyalty driven by clubs.

Findings: Personal brand identification with authentic football stars is a focal factor enabling the creation of loyalty (attitudinal and behavioral) to the whole discipline. Consumers' perceptions of the authenticity of the personal brands of football players play a role in increasing identification with these personal brands. This identification is essential in achieving loyalty to football as a sports discipline via football celebrities.

Implications: Football players perceived as authentic are evaluated more positively, leading to consumer identification with these players, which, in turn, increases consumers' loyalty to football. Thus, the presence of authentic, skilled players is important for football, but the actual loyalty effect from authenticity can be achieved only by identification. Therefore, football

requires exceptional, strong stars who reflect a set of desired personal values. Further research is needed to identify the desired set of values that leads to identification with football stars.

Keywords: human brand, personal brand, personal brand authenticity, brand authenticity, football, brand identification, brand loyalty, behavioral loyalty, attitudinal loyalty, structural equation modeling (SEM).

Introduction

In the current era of fake news, illusions, manipulations, and other artificial attributes of virtuality and reality, authenticity is highly appreciated and is becoming a crucial factor in accomplishing brand success (Audrezet *et al.*, 2018; Mills and Robson, 2019). Although different definitions of authenticity have been proposed, the definition most commonly used states that authenticity involves being true to oneself (Rogers, 1959). Authenticity is the "unobstructed operation of one's true, or core, self in one's daily enterprise" (Kernis, 2003, p. 1). For individuals to be "real," their behavior should be motivated by their thoughts and feelings (Moulard *et al.*, 2016). Authenticity, particularly for an individual, is an essential component for bond creation because it encompasses in a single dimension all the facets of the individual. Moreover, authenticity drives dedication in terms of positive responses to a brand (Morhart *et al.*, 2015), such as feeling love via identification. Beverland (2005, p. 461) stressed that brand authenticity "serves consumers as a form of self-expression for brands that represent a genuine expression of inner personal truth".

Further, Womick *et al.* (2019) asserted that to achieve social and psychological wellbeing, it is best for people to be themselves. When the true self is expressed as a type of subjective authenticity, people feel better and are more successful in achieving their life goals. Thus, these are the reasons that consumers seek authentic brands that can help them to authenticate themselves. People admire celebrities who they feel are authentic and similar to them in a real or desired manner. Therefore, the identification factor will probably be an essential element of loyalty creation. Elbedweihy *et al.* (2016, p. 2901) defined consumers' brand identification as the "perceived overlap between one's own self-concept and the brand's identity" and highlighted that such brand identification has a significant influence on consumer behavior. Hence, according to the personal brand of a celebrity, the identification with a star means that a particular fan acknowledges feeling an affinity with the star. This connection is essential to establishing a bond that may lead to such desired outcomes as feelings of trust in, and loyalty to, a star and even toward the entire industry this star represents. This connection can arise when an individual identifies a personal continuum of identification with the celebrity. This mechanism is well defined by the dimension of identification (McGinnis and Glibkowski, 2019). Hence, it is the reason that brand authenticity and identification studies are so vital.

Hence, the influence of authenticity and identification on the relationship between celebrities and the general public is a topic that is attracting increasing research attention. For example, Close *et al.* (2011) examined the personal brands of doctoral candidates, Moulard *et al.* (2014) focused on artists' authenticity, and Moulard *et al.* (2015) introduced the measurement scale of personal brand authenticity. Moreover, Kowalczyk and Pounders (2016) contributed significantly to this topic by exploring personal brand authenticity in social media and highlighted that emotional attachment and authenticity are the key reasons that consumers follow celebrities on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram or Twitter.

In addition, Audrezet *et al.* (2018) investigated the social media environment and explored factors that help social media influencers to maintain their authenticity for securing their influencing power. In addition, recently, McGinnis and Glibkowski (2019) explored factors influencing the success of Bruce Springsteen's personal brand and establishing his authenticity. However, despite this considerable interest, the outcomes of personal brands remain unclear. There is a lack of studies on the role played by identification with the personal brand in strengthening the influence of its authenticity on loyalty. Therefore, the current study explored this gap in the related literature, namely, the effects of the authenticity that players are perceived to have in the context of sports, in particular, football, on the identification with the football players, and subsequently on loyalty to football.

Why football? Football is one of the most successful sports disciplines that attract a larger audience worldwide than other sports. According to Nielsen (2018), more than 40% of individuals aged 16 years and above in major global population centers are interested or very interested in football, and this percentage is more than that for any other sport. Thus, football is the world's most popular sports discipline and, as Morrow (1996) stated, football players are the key assets of football clubs. Therefore, this study focused on this sport's top players.

Certainly, top football players are "global celebrities." It can be said that, in sports, personality worship occurs. People idolize top athletes much more frequently than they do famous scientists, politicians, and artists. Perhaps only in the cinema and music industry can a similar level of adoration can be observed (e.g., Luo *et al.*, 2010; Mathys *et al.*, 2016). Thus, given the large audience it attracts, the whole fascination with football is an interesting phenomenon worth examining in greater depth—in particular, interesting implications may arise from the

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relationship between top football players, these players' authenticity, and fans' identification with, and loyalty to, the whole football discipline. Hence, it is important to understand the interrelationships between all these factors. This knowledge would reveal some of the mechanisms that link football star players and consumers, thereby providing interesting insights both for understanding modern societies and for business purposes.

Moreover, the authenticity of sports industry brands, such as clubs and athletes, pays—the global sponsorship value of sports increased from US\$37.9 billion in 2007 to US\$65.8 billion in 2018, recording a 43% growth (Statista, 2018). In this regard, Lu and Xu (2015) and Maderer *et al*. (2016) examined the effects of sports brand associations on brand loyalty (attitudinal and behavioral) in the sports and football industry, respectively, but they omitted personal brands, their authenticity, and the identification factor. Thus, there is another literature gap for the current study to fill. Moreover, they noted the different effects of sports brand associations on the attitudinal and the behavioral dimensions of loyalty. Thus, in light of their findings, examining the effects of football stars' brand authenticity and brand identity on the loyalty dimensions may yield promising results and contribute significantly to marketing theory and practice, particularly when considering the differences between the various types of sports fans.

Another notable study, that of Guèvremont and Grohmann (2016), indicated the need for conducting detailed investigations on this topic by including the "spectator category." They suggested that the existing need for self-authentication through authentic brands is situational and differs between consumers. Hence, this finding justifies the performance of an in-depth examination of football consumers' loyalty. Thus, it would be useful to understand how the perceptions related to football stars' authenticity drive the loyalty (attitudinal and behavioral) of various categories of football "followers" based on the different types of spectators that Giulianotti (2002) identified.

In summary of the aforementioned considerations, the study aimed to ascertain the following: how do football players' authentic brands lead consumers to identify with these players? In addition, how do such brands encourage consumers to be more loyal to football? Moreover, how does personal brand identification lead to enhanced consumer loyalty toward this business and strengthen the effects of football players' authentic brands on loyalty (attitudinal and behavioral)?

Finally, how do the effects of attitudinal and behavioral loyalty driven by personal brand authenticity vary across spectator categories?

Answering these questions would shed more light on the value of the top players' personal brand authenticity in the football industry.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. First, the conceptual framework of this study based on a literature review is presented. In the next section, we present the conceptual framework of this study based on a literature review. Then, we discuss the methodology and results. In the last section, we provide the conclusions and implications of this study based on the discussed findings in the context of the broader football industry.

Conceptual framework and hypotheses development

Personal, human, and celebrity brand

The authenticity of personal brands has become increasingly critical in a virtual world that is frequently dominated by "fake news," "fake images," and "fake impressions." Before describing how authenticity might be considered in the context of personal brands, it is necessary to define the latter concept more precisely. Therefore, it is vital to start with the clarification: what do the terms "personal brand" and "human brand" mean? Can these terms be used interchangeably? Peters (1997), who defined it as "the brand called YOU," invented the personal branding construct. Hines (2004, p. 60) refined this definition as follows: "The personal brand is about recognizing who you are and what you do best, and communicating that to clients." Thus, a personal brand can be defined as a planned process of self-marketing (Khedher, 2014).

Initially, the concept of self-marketing seemed to apply mainly to celebrities (Rein *et al.*, 1987), politicians, and business leaders (Nolan, 2015; Schawbel, 2009; Schneidt *et al.*, 2018; Shepherd, 2005; Thompson-Whiteside *et al.*, 2018). However, over time, it has become important to all knowledge workers (Kucharska, 2019), including managers (Brunetti *et al.*, 2019), scientists, higher education teachers (Gander, 2014), artists (McGinnis and Glibkowski, 2019), students who are about to enter the labor market (Lee and Cavanaugh, 2016), and all social media users, regardless of their profession (Labrecque *et al.*, 2011). Dutta (2010) developed Morrow's (1996) idea of human assets by suggesting that all professionals need a personal brand strategy.

According to Kucharska and Mikołajczak (2018), a personal brand is a personal intangible asset that is defined as the name of a real individual combined with all the notions intended to identify the individual and differentiate them from others.

Further, Thomson (2006, p. 104) focused on celebrities and defined a human brand as "a well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communications effort." Many authors have expanded this concept by focusing on famous individuals (e.g., Chae and Lee, 2013; Huang and Huang, 2016; Orth *et al.*, 2010). Portal *et al.* (2018, p. 371) followed Malone and Fiske's (2013) concept and presented the human brand as a brand that is perceived to be human. The concept is based on the idea that brand anthropomorphism leads to brand personalization, which makes it warmer, closely related to consumers, and, similar to people, capable of developing authentic bonds. Table 1 summarizes the "human" and "personal" brand constructs. In the marketing context of the visibility creation of humans, the terms can be used interchangeably, as Eagar and Lindridge (2015) and Eagar and Dann (2016) observed. In addition, Table 1 presents definitions of celebrity authenticity, brand, and sports celebrities to clarify the key terms used in the current study.

Table 1: Key definitions

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Table 1

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Relationship between brand authenticity and identification with a football player

Several studies have investigated brands and authenticity. According to Bruhn *et al.* (2012), the concept of authenticity is related to continuity (e.g., lasting over time), originality, naturalness (e.g., honesty), and reliability (e.g., fulfilling promises). Following this concept, Schallehn *et al.* (2014) highlighted that brand continuity, consistency, and individuality are the key predictors of brand authenticity. Napoli *et al.* (2014, p. 1091) defined brand authenticity as "a subjective evaluation of genuineness ascribed to a brand by consumers," whereas Moulard *et al.* (2015, p. 175) defined it as "the perception that a celebrity behaves according to his or her true self."

Moulard *et al.* (2014) argued that the perception regarding artists' brand authenticity has a strong effect on the positive attitude that the surrounding world displays toward them. To emphasize its significance, previous studies asserted that brand authenticity favorably influences a brand's relationship quality (Fritz *et al.* 2017) and creates brand meaning (Beverland, 2005). Overall, as Moulard *et al.* (2016) noted, brands that are perceived as authentic receive a more positive evaluation. As stated in the introduction, authenticity can be considered the first step in the process of creating an emotional link between a public person and the broader society. Audrezet *et al.* (2018) claimed that authentic human brands are driven by inner desires and passion, and not by commercial goals. In particular, authentic proficiency and genuine passion attract more attention than does any other commercially created image.

Apart from authenticity, other traits and dimensions of personal brands are essential to create a sense of belonging and attachment to a celebrity brand. One of these traits is identification. Identification is a social process of influence whereby one individual adopts particular values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors reflected by another individual or group (Kelman, 1961). The transfer of meaning theory (McCracken, 1989) helped clarify the motives behind identification. Namely, "meaning" is an integral part of human life. To humans, personality and acting hold deep meaning. According to the transfer theory (McCracken, 1989), the the perceived personality meaning attached to a celebrity is transferred to fans via their identification with this celebrity. Hence, for football consumers seeking authenticity, the identification with an "authentic star" is one way of fulfilling their authenticity need. Correspondingly, identification with an entity is likely to occur when that entity satisfies one or more "self-definitional needs such as self-categorization, self-distinctiveness and self-enhancement" (Ashforth and Mael, 1989, p. 374) of a fan. In summary, football consumers who desire to self-categorize themselves as authentic football fans are more likely to identify themselves with authentic football stars to transfer the stars' meaning to themselves.

In the context of the sports industry, particularly football, a club team comprises the world's best players that the club can afford. Well-known names ensure top results and drive the the value of both the team and the club (Puente-Díaz and Cavazos-Arroyo, 2018). From this perspective, sports celebrities are personal brands with distinctive personalities with which fans can identify (Carlson and Donavan, 2013). They possess unique professional skills that attract viewers, and

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they use mass media to build their identity. According to Kowalczyk and Pounders (2016), authenticity, emotional affection, and identification are the main motives for fans to follow celebrities. This view aligns with the social identity theory (Ashforth and Mael 1989), which states that a strong, clear self-definition of an individual leads to consistent and authentic behaviors. As a result, those individuals gain recognition and, if they are authentic in the eyes of the audience and their behavior receives approval, the public identifies with their brand authenticity, which results in personal brand identification. This bond becomes strong and the favored individual becomes famous and popular, as occurs with football celebrities. For example, Richelieu (2012) demonstrated that authenticity is a key value of a football brand. Moreover, Carlson and Donavan (2013) confirmed that consumers' identification with a popular athlete is accompanied by their emotional attachment to the athlete's club and team. Such attachment might derive from different factors, such as originality, continuity, reliability, club stories, and the entire life history of this star (Doloriert and Whitworth, 2011), which build the authenticity of a club and its players. Thus, the perceived authenticity of a football player can motivate fans' identification with the player.

This discussion emphasizes the affirmative power of brand authenticity, which is worth deeper investigation in the context of personal football brands as a driver of brand identification. Consequently, this study proposed the following hypothesis:

> H1: The perceived authenticity of a football player's personal brand positively influences identification with this brand.

Influence of football players' brand authenticity on loyalty to football

Loyalty is a vital component of the sports industry, which enables all the involved parties—players, clubs, and sponsors—to earn profits. Overall, as in other industries, new customer acquisition and customer retention are central issues. Although greater market penetration in terms of fresh customers is necessary, a sound base of loyal customers is undisputedly important for success. The marketing literature has highlighted the growing significance of loyalty and relationships. According to Dick and Basu (1994), loyalty is defined by favorable attitudes and repeat purchases. Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) examined the two facets of loyalty: behavioral and attitudinal. They found that purchase loyalty leads to a more significant market share (a result

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of repeated purchasing), whereas attitudinal loyalty facilitates price increases (a result of a positive, favorable perception of a particular product, service, or brand). Bandyopadhyay and Gupta (2004) and Bandyopadhyay *et al.* (2005) broadened the investigation and demonstrated that a set of positive attributes shapes positive attitudes, which is an effective predictor of behavioral loyalty (Bandyopadhyay and Martell, 2007).

Based on these findings, the present study focused on the attitudinal loyalty to football. As an industry, football needs customers as value co-creators (Kolyperas *et al.*, 2019; Uhrich, 2014). Alexandris and Tsiotsou (2012) and Koenig-Lewis *et al.* (2018) found that the performance of players and teams is not the only factor motivating customers to choose football matches as entertainment. They highlighted another set of factors influencing fan enjoyment delivered by clubs, such as the whole game and social experience, including the atmosphere; stadium facilities and services; half-time competitions and events; and the various events before, during, and after the match. All these components together have a positive influence on consumers' satisfaction with, and their attitudinal loyalty to, a particular player, club, and team as well as toward the entire football industry and its offerings, including game attendance, access to a television license to watch league matches, and sports souvenirs. Therefore, attitudinal loyalty to football is vital for developing the football industry in general. The attitudinal loyalty of an individual consumer justifies all the football-related expenditure by this individual—the higher the attitudinal loyalty, the higher the spending acceptance. Alexandris and Tsiotsou (2012) provided empirical findings supporting the positive relationship between the behavioral and attitudinal aspects of loyalty. In this regard, earlier, Funk and Pastore (2000) reported similar findings in the context of professional sports, as did Alexandris *et al.* (2008) in the context of sports and leisure as a form of entertainment.

According to Karjaluoto *et al.* (2016), sports personalities are major contributors to marketing results, such as team identification and loyalty. Moreover, brand authenticity leads to an increase in outcomes beyond this relationship, such as trust (Schallehn *et al.*, 2014), brand attachment (Nam *et al.*, 2011), and brand love (Manthiou *et al.*, 2018). Lu *et al.* (2015) demonstrated that brand authenticity significantly influences brand equity, including brand awareness, image, perceived quality, and loyalty. Thus, the perceived authenticity of a football player can be extended to identification with this player and subsequently with the player's club and team

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(Carlson and Donavan, 2013; Sutton *et al*., 1997). Consequently, personal brand authenticity can affect the attitudinal and behavioral outcomes of not only products and brands, but also entire disciplines, as in the case of football.

Based on the above discussion, the following hypotheses were developed:

H2: The authenticity of a football player's personal brand positively influences attitudinal loyalty toward the sport of football.

H3: The authenticity of a football player's personal brand positively influences behavioral loyalty toward the sport of football.

Influence of football players' brand identification on loyalty to football

Brand identification is a necessary antecedent of several behaviors that consumers enact, both in terms of actions (purchase) and voice (recommendations, patronage, and 'word of mouth'). Consumers do not devote time and effort to support brands unless they have a strong reason to do so—their identification with the brand is one such reason. Hence, as stated in a previous section regarding the expected "transfer of meaning" (McCracken, 1989), fans that identify with a particular celebrity who they perceive as authentic are likely to transfer this authenticity to themselves. This transfer is important for loyalty creation. It may be reflected in consumer attitude or behavior, or both. In support of this view within the football context, sociologist Critcher (1979, p. 170) stated that "traditional football fans" view themselves as club "members". He also noted that this identity is rooted in the unbreakable, reciprocal relationship between the fan and the club. In addition, Critcher identified a group of "modern fans," whose identification with the brand of a football club is rooted in anticipated personal benefits. Carlson and Donavan (2013) confirmed that consumers who identify with a famous football player are more emotionally attached to that athlete's club and team. Further, consumer identification with a football celebrity is a strong predictor of retail spending and the number of games watched (Carlson and Donavan, 2013). The management of top players is a critical issue for the brand position of football clubs because well-known names guarantee recognition and identification for the club. When a leading player is transferred to another team (e.g., when Cristiano Ronaldo

transferred from Real Madrid to Juventus Turin in 2018), brands' equity depreciation of the old club seems to be inevitable (Strategic Direction, 2017).

Sutton *et al.* (1997) noted that individuals' identification with a player makes their relationship with the player's club more intense and personal. Richelieu (2012) highlighted that the more the consumers identify with a sports brand, the higher the chance of sustaining their loyalty. This finding is consistent with that of previous research, which noted that strong identification with a sports lovemark leads to "loyalty beyond reason" (Shuv-Ami *et al.*, 2018) and linked strong identification to increases in attendance (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 1995) and spending (Lichtenstein *et al.*, 2004). Hence, when identification with a human brand is high, this tie increases the attitudinal and behavioral outcomes of consumers, such as loyalty (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 1995; Kuenzel and Vaux Halliday, 2008).

Based on this discussion, the following hypotheses were developed:

H4: Identification with a football player's personal brand positively affects attitudinal loyalty toward football.

H5: Identification with a football player's personal brand positively affects behavioral loyalty toward football.

Although both components of loyalty are important, studies have found that attitudinal loyalty is an antecedent of behavioral loyalty for different brands and sectors (e.g., Bandyopadhyay and Martell, 2007; Jaiswal and Niraj, 2011). Hence, although this finding has not been revealed in the context of sports, the present study hypothesized that there is a similar relationship between commitment and a positive attitude toward football and actual purchase behavior in the football industry (e.g., tickets and merchandise purchases). Therefore, this study proposed the following hypothesis:

H6: Attitudinal loyalty toward football leads directly to behavioral loyalty.

Expected mediations

This study's hypotheses emphasize the affirmative power of the football star's personal brand authenticity to influence the loyalty (attitudinal and behavioral) to the football discipline. In

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addition to examining the direct dependencies formulated in the presented hypotheses, it is essential to explore in detail the indirect relationships between the variables considered in this study. Expected mediations were assumed to be significant for strengthening the connection between personal brand authenticity and loyalty (attitudinal and behavioral), since the former can empower loyalty because of the influence of a well-established, recognized dimension, such as brand identification, which is an antecedent of behavioral outcomes, as demonstrated in earlier studies. Namely, the identified research gap owing to the lack of studies that explain the role played by personal brand identification in strengthening the influence of authenticity on loyalty requires to be filled through mediation analysis. Hence, based on Elbedweihy *et al*. (2016) and Beverland (2005), celebrity brand identification has been included in this study as a type of overlap of consumers' inner self and the self that the celebrity they admire expresses. That bond may lead not only to loyalty toward this particular celebrity brand but also to loyalty toward the entire football industry, but only if its brand is authentic and identification occurs. In the football industry, the players are always perceived first in a broader context and then in their own context, and they are always a part of the bigger show performed by the team, club, or league. Thus, in line with the discussion in the introduction section and supported by Wang and Kim's (2019) study that highlighted identification as an important factor in fans' behaviors, the expected mediated function of personal brand identification was specified as follows:

H_{M1}: Personal brand identification mediates the relationship between personal brand authenticity and loyalty, both (a) attitudinal and (b) behavioral, to football.

In addition, attitudinal loyalty often plays the role of a mediator between many predictors and customer behavior (Jaiswal and Niraj, 2011; Ledikwe *et al*., 2019; Maderer *et al*., 2016). Attitudinally loyal customers have a strong internal disposition and psychological attachment to brand-related behaviors (Rauyruen and Miller, 2007). Thus, continuing the investigation on the personal brand, this study expected the influence of personal brand identification on brand loyalty to be mediated by the attitudinal factor. In summary, the following mediation was expected:

H_{M2}: Attitudinal loyalty mediates the influence of personal brand identification on behavioral loyalty.

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework of the study.

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Figure 1: Theoretical model

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Figure 1

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Control variables (CVs)

Giulianotti (2002) suggested a different structural connection between four identified categories of spectators: supporters, followers, fans, and flâneurs. He proposed these four categories of football consumers based on whether they adhere to the "traditional" approach to football, which is rooted in local, social relationships and associations, or to the "modern" approach, which is visible in the total commodification of football. Further, he noted the "hot" form of loyalty (football as a way of life) and the "cool" loyalty style (football as a favorite entertainment). Giulianotti (2002) defined traditional/hot spectators as supporters who make a long-term personal and emotional investment in the football club. They may purchase shares in the club or buy expensive club gadgets; however, their outlay is underpinned by a conscious commitment to show solidarity and offer financial support to the club. The traditional/cool group of spectators (followers) supports clubs, players, managers, and other football-linked people most often via the popular "cool" media. The modern/hot group are spectators (fans) of a football club or of specific players—particularly celebrities. These fans are "hot" in terms of their identification, but their relationship is more distant than that enjoyed by supporters. The strength of their identification with a club and its players is most readily authenticated through their consumption of related products. The identity of modern/cool consumers (flâneurs) with a club or players is reflected by a set of market-dominated virtual interactions or through other popular "cool" media. Based on this theory, loyalty to a particular club is not equal to loyalty to the general football discipline in a particular group of spectators, and the personal brands of top players can strongly affect attitudes and behaviors.

Based on Giulianotti's (2002) categories, it can be assumed that traditional "supporters" are very strongly connected with the club. Thus, this category's loyalty to the whole discipline driven by the particular football club is probably stronger than that of the other categories. However, previous research has not explored how loyalty to football is shaped when driven by football

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stars. Probably, The club-driven loyalty of traditional supporters is likely to be stronger than their player-driven loyalty because of the community factor, which may be strongly influential in forming loyalty to a club and not to a player. However, modern "fans" are less club-oriented and treat football more like an entertainment source than a style of living, religion, or even family, unlike traditional supporters. Therefore, they are expected to reflect stronger loyalty toward the whole discipline when such loyalty is driven by football stars' authenticity than when it is driven by clubs. In contrast to "flâneurs," "fans" attend matches and buy gadgets. Thus, the "flâneurs" probably reflect a stronger effect on attitudinal loyalty than behavioral. Similar to "followers," "flâneurs" interact with clubs and football stars mainly virtually. Hence, their behavioral ties with football as a discipline, according to the category descriptions of Giulianotti (2002), seem to be weaker than that of supporters. It would be interesting to investigate these predictions and determine the extent to which the loyalty of "supporters", "followers", "fans", and "flâneurs" to football is a result of the perceived authenticity of football stars. Giannotti did not consider football celebrities' connections with spectators. Hence, including the spectator categories in the proposed model would improve the understanding of the nature of loyalty to football driven by the personal brand authenticity of football stars. To this end, dummy variables were created for each group, based on the category characteristics that Giulianotti (2002) described, to verify the following hypothesis:

H_{cv}: The attitudinal and behavioral loyalty effects for each of the respondent groups— characterized as (a) supporters, (b) followers, (c) fans, and (d) flâneurs—differ.

Methodology

Data collection was performed electronically via Facebook through sponsored advertisements that targeted respondents based in Poland who are interested in sports, particularly football, to participate in the study. The advertisements had a link to a Google Forms survey. Respondents who agreed to participate in the survey received an open qualification question, which ensured they had the necessary knowledge to complete the questionnaire. That is, they had to name their favorite football player. Data from respondents who did not provide a real football player's name were excluded. Interestingly, 84% of the football stars that the respondents named are from countries other than Poland. This convenient sampling method reduced the risk of a sample size

that was too small and a sample that did not have the necessary knowledge to answer the required questions.

The respondents reacted to statements adapted from the validated measurement scales of all constructs included in the theoretical model using a seven-point Likert scale. The sources of these scales and the statements used are presented in Appendix 1. A pilot study involving 34 respondents was conducted before the final study. This approach made it possible to improve the statements that the respondents perceived as unclear (Hair *et al.*, 2010).

The data were collected between May and July 2018. Because of the World Cup held that year, this study attracted high interest. However, the majority of the responses (around 80%) were gathered before June 14, when the championship had just started; thus, the results from the World Cup did not affect the study results based on the teams' performance. The access data were available because the data collection software used in this study registered the date and time of access by respondents. Further, no other questions were asked in relation to specific teams. This study focused on individual football players who played for a specific national team during the World Cup and played for a foreign football team for the rest of the year.

After eliminating invalid or incomplete questionnaires, the final sample comprised 562 respondents, most of whom were men (86%) aged 18–24 years (80%). To detect potential common method bias, Harman's single-factor test was applied. The obtained result was satisfying at 3.7 and explained 30% of the variance (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003, p. 889). The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy index was 0.904, and the total variance explained level was 84%, which is considered very good (Bartlett, 1950). After a positive assessment of normality, the data were analyzed using the structural equation modeling method.

Based on the theoretical model presented in Figure 1, measurement and structural confirmatory factor analysis models were developed to ensure that the measurement scales performed correctly. Consistency tests, such as the average of variance extracted (AVE), composite reliability (CR), and Cronbach's alpha, were used to evaluate model quality. Appendix 1 presents detailed information about the scales used and the reliability achieved. The square root of the AVE of each construct exceeded the correlation between any pair of distinct constructs,

indicating satisfactory discriminant validity. Thus, the results supported the discriminant validity of the measurement model. Table 2 presents details of the reliability measures.

Table 2: Factor correlation matrix with square root of the AVE on the diagonal

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Table 2

Next, the maximum likelihood method was used for model estimation. An evaluation of the measurement model quality was conducted using a set of tests, including the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA; Steiger and Lind, 1980) using a reference value ≤ 0.08, CMIN/df (Wheaton *et al.*, 1977) using a reference value ≤ 5, and comparative fit index (CFI) (McDonald and Marsh, 1990) using a reference value close to 1, utilizing SPSS AMOS 25 software. Table 3 presents the empirical results of the models, including the goodness-of-fit tests.

Based on these results, the model was considered a good fit in relation to the data. A model reliability level of 4.6 can be considered positive using the reference value ≤ 5. Based on the RMSEA, the model fit the data at 0.08 and met the reference values. The measurements of the goodness-of-fit were close to 1, which confirmed that the model was of the expected quality. The AVE exceeded 0.51 for all constructs, which is considered acceptable. Hair *et al.* (2010) suggested that an AVE of 0.5 or higher indicates adequate convergence of the scales used. Cronbach's alpha was used to confirm the consistency of the measurement model. The alpha coefficient was higher than 0.7 for all constructs (Francis, 2001), except for "personal brand authenticity," for which it was very close to the accepted minimum of 0.7 (0.679). However, notably, the obtained CR for this construct when assessing the general internal consistency of the used scale was 0.76, which is appropriate, according to Hair *et al.* (2010) and DeVellis (2017). Moreover, Kline (2016, p. 313) indicated that CR and AVE coefficients are generally better alternatives for reliability measurement than Cronbach's alpha. Appendix 1 provides details on the AVE, CR, and Cronbach's alpha obtained.

Results

Table 3 presents a comparison of the results obtained for two models: Model A run with CVs and Model B run without CVs (Aguinis and Vandenberg, 2014; Becker *et al.*, 2016). In both cases, for both models, the general results of the hypotheses verification were similar, and all hypotheses except H2 and H3 were supported. Figure 2 presents the results obtained for all spectators.

Figure 2: Empirical model with CVs

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Figure 2

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Notes: chi-square = 503.49, df = 151, CMIN/df = 3.01, RMSEA = 0.065, CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.93, $n = 561$, ML = maximum likelihood probability levels; *** $p \leq .001$, ** $p \leq .01$, * $p \leq .05$; ns = not significant.

In addition, although the direct positive influence of a particular football player's personal brand authenticity on attitudinal loyalty to football was not confirmed, an indirect effect was observed that was fully mediated by identification with the football player's brand. Likewise, the direct positive influence of a particular football player's personal brand authenticity on behavioral loyalty to football was not confirmed (the direct effect was negative), but an indirect positive effect was confirmed when mediated by identification with the football player's personal brand. This result suggests that identification with a brand is a significant bridge between personal brand authenticity and behavioral loyalty. The observed mediations showed the partially mediated effect of attitudinal loyalty on celebrity brand identification and behavioral loyalty to football.

Table 3: Results

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Table 3

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The imputation of CVs and comparison of Models A and B provided a greater understanding of the nature of all mediated relationships presented in the theoretical model. However, this study also considered the differences between various categories of spectators—it found no visible

change in the attitude of fans toward football and that the group of spectators differed in terms of behavioral loyalty only. The analysis of the CV imputation results showed that the spectator category did not significantly influence attitudinal loyalty toward football. After verification of the significance of the CVs, all impotent controls were excluded. According to Aguinis and Vandenberg (2014) and Becker *et al.* (2016), CVs with no significant effect should be immediately removed from the model because, otherwise, each CV imputation may change and interfere with the results. Therefore, non-significant effects noted for attitudinal loyalty are not reported in Table 3. This table shows that the strongest behavioral effect is observed for the group of fans, followed by supporters, based on behavioral loyalty toward football in general, driven by the personal brand authenticity of football stars. This study contributes to the literature by revealing that the loyalty effect toward the whole discipline driven by the authenticity of football stars was largest for the "fans" group.

Conversely, Giulianotti identified the strongest loyalty driven by clubs for "supporters." Figure 2 presents all the final estimates and hypotheses verification results for the models. The analysis showed a significant difference in behavioral loyalty between fans and supporters, influenced by the presented structure of the relationships. Of note, the imputation of CVs supercharged the mediation effect of attitudinal loyalty on identification with top players and behavioral loyalty toward football. This result indicated that the behavior of groups of spectators, such as supporters and fans, is influenced by their identification with football players, which is strongly influenced by the authenticity of players. Descriptive statistics were used to determine how spectators view behavioral loyalty. Figure 3 shows that, in terms of behavior, supporters and fans are the most loyal groups of spectators. This outcome confirmed the significance of the authenticity of football stars for the presented structure of relationships. The overall results for the model suggested that behavioral loyalty influenced by the personal brand authenticity of football players varies significantly depending on the group of spectators.

Figure 3: Spectators' perceptions of behavioral loyalty driven by personal brand authenticity

Figure 3

In summary, the results indicated that consumers' perceptions of the authenticity of football players' personal brands positively influence their identification with a particular football player's personal brand. Moreover, the study confirmed a mediation function of identification with a top player. Identification is a key mediator in achieving loyalty toward football, which is generated by football stars. These results indicated that authenticity causes fans to support and identify with football players; however, the latter identification dimension is strategic in leading people to follow and positively respond to football, such as by investing money, purchasing game tickets, and purchasing merchandise. The analysis of all four categories of fans indicated that the group of "modern fan" spectators exhibits the strongest behavioral loyalty.

Discussion and implications

This study broadens the understanding of the influence of the personal brand authenticity of football stars on spectator loyalty to football. Although it is essential to determine the antecedents of authenticity in line with Moulard *et al*. (2016), the outcomes of authenticity are also significant, particularly from a managerial perspective. This study reveals that without identification, the authenticity of a football star does not contribute positively to behavioral loyalty. This important point merits further discussion. Beverland (2005) highlighted that brand authenticity requires managers to understate their overt marketing skills and instead locate their brands within communities and subcultures. The general finding of the present study is that personal brand identification is a strong mediator between personal brand authenticity and attitudinal and behavioral loyalty. This finding has interesting practical and theoretical implications, as outlined in the next section.

Theoretical implications

This study contributes to the literature on personal brand authenticity by analyzing its effects on loyalty. This is among the first few studies to examine the relationship between personal brand authenticity and loyalty, and to identify a conditional link between the two. Another contribution to the literature on personal brand authenticity is that this study introduces the mediation variable of brand identification. Brand identification is particularly suitable for complementing authenticity as a dimension of celebrity brands, and it is essential to fully attain the effects of

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brand authenticity. Consumers need to perceive themselves in celebrities, given that celebrities epitomize people's desires and aspirations.

One of the most striking findings of this study is regarding the role played by brand identification, because this finding indicates that affection for a sport is largely related to athletes who act as iconic figures. That is, spectators' engagement and identification with athletes drive spectators' attachment to a sport, rather than the sports discipline itself. Therefore, sports celebrities are key players in determining the success of a sport. Moreover, a novel feature of this study is that it investigated the important outcomes of brand authenticity, such as expected quality and trust (e.g., Moulard *et al.*, 2016). The current study adds two outcomes—attitudinal and behavioral brand loyalty—that refer more to behavioral outcomes than to consumer perceptions. This study relates brand authenticity not only to the brand's expected quality and trust, but also to consumers' actual behavior.

Another significant, new contribution is the current study's examination of loyalty perception across four categories of spectators driven by the authenticity power of personal football brands rather than that of football clubs. The results indicate the most potent effect on behavioral loyalty for the "modern fan" group. Behavioral loyalty (i.e., willingness to pay for sports-related merchandise) differs depending on the extent of passion toward a particular sports discipline, whereas attitudinal loyalty (i.e., interest or attraction) is not affected by the degree of passion. Top celebrity players evoke the same intensity in people, regardless of whether they are supporters, followers, fans, or flâneurs. Consequently, interest in sports can be increased by drawing on well-selected sportspeople who act as iconic symbols of a sports discipline.

Managerial implications

Sports is a powerful domain in contemporary society, and football is a relevant context for studies on the authenticity of sports celebrities' personal brands, both for its large audience worldwide and for its power in shaping role models for young players and the public. Moreover, the sports industry is worth billions of dollars and attracts brand investments worldwide. Celebrities, including sports and football stars, are usually aware of their image and invest effort into tailoring this image appropriately. However, they sometimes underestimate the power of authenticity. This research offers insights for sportspeople as well as their managers on crafting a

plausible, authentic personal brand. Although authenticity is essential to obtain benefits, one should not pursue authenticity solely for its benefits. Rather, personal brand authenticity should spontaneously arise from the celebrity's actions. Football stars' personal brand authenticity generates identification among their fans. Therefore, these celebrities should be aware of their status as role models. They act as ambassadors of their sport; thus, their authenticity must be genuine and transparent, rather than fictional.

In addition to authenticity, this study revealed a mediation function of personal brand identification between authenticity and loyalty. This study's findings regarding personal brand authenticity are appropriately illustrated by the case of Colin Kaepernick, whose protest in 2016 against racial injustice by kneeling (instead of standing) when the US national anthem was played before a game resulted in a crisis in the entire National Football League. Some players and fans supported his cause, whereas others did not, which ultimately affected sponsorship and patronage. This case represents the findings of the current study because, when football stars are authentic and recognized, yet not all fans identify with them, some fans may become less loyal to the sport. Another example involves Kepa Arrizabalag, a goalkeeper for Chelsea, who refused to leave the pitch after he was recalled by his coach in February 2019. His unusual behavior was authentic; however, it was not sufficiently appreciated to cause fans to identify with him as a football hero. Thus, when presenting their true self, football stars do not always portray an image with which the majority of football fans wish to identify, and this may seriously affect sponsors. Hence, clubs that collect stars who attract an audience should attend more to their authenticity, which should lead to fan identification, given that identification leads to loyalty. This causal effect is the reason that identification mediated the role of authenticity in this study, and it could play a significant role in winning loyalty toward the whole industry.

Overall, from the perspective of the sports (football) industry, top players are vital for raising, increasing, and preserving spectator interest, passion, and involvement in the discipline to drive behaviors such as purchasing game tickets and merchandise. Thus, top players' personal brands and authenticity and the process of identification by the audience must be properly managed to the extent possible, both at club and at player levels.

Limitations and future research

Although this study provides insights into football celebrities' personal brand authenticity, it has some limitations. First, this empirical investigation involved people from one country only. Given that sports and football are perceived differently in different countries and cultures, it is worth extending the research beyond Poland. Second, different sports may have different criteria for increasing interest, attraction, and loyalty among the public. Therefore, it is worth considering sports other than football to validate the results of this study. Third, the study model was purposefully designed to limit the variables to a reasonable number (i.e., brand authenticity, brand identification, and brand loyalty). Although the mediation of brand identification is an interesting result, a better picture of the effects of brand authenticity could be gained by including more variables, such as perceived value and attitudes toward football players and clubs.

Fourth, a personal brand is a construct related to a single individual, whereas football is a team sport. Therefore, it would be interesting to apply this study model to individual sports (e.g., tennis) and teams. In particular, it would be interesting to see the results on including football clubs' brand authenticity and brand identification in the model. Future research should consider the interrelationships between teams and top players. Fifth, the findings revealed that identification with top stars driven by their authenticity positively affects behavioral loyalty and is strongly influenced by four subgroups of spectators. It would useful to learn how particular factors of the personal brand authenticity of football stars could lead to personal brand identification within each subgroup that Giulianotti (2002) identified. This knowledge would empower the effectiveness of authenticity communication by football stars.

To summarize, based on these discussions, authentic and qualified players are vital for football. They can provide excellent entertainment, but the real effect of loyalty can be achieved through identification. Thus, unique, influential stars that reflect a set of desirable personal values, attitudes, and behaviors are needed to create loyalty toward football. It is worth mentioning that the current study ignored the brand polarization factor highlighted recently by Osuna Ramírez *et al*. (2019). However, it is easy to predict that this factor may significantly influence studies about personal brand authenticity and loyalty toward general football. Namely, some authentic top personal brands may be comparably loved by some fans and hated by other parts of the football audience. It would be interesting to investigate how this polarization may influence loyalty

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toward the whole industry. Moreover, on examining personal brand identification—specifically, ways to achieve personal brand identification driven by authenticity—McGinnis and Glibkowski (2019) highlighted techniques such as the narrative structure of overall communication and the universal themes of given stories to create a space in which fans can identify with the star. Some of these techniques may be applied to football celebrities; however, to specify such techniques for football stars, further research is required. Some similarities between celebrity branding approaches exist, but industries differ; thus, from the managerial perspective, it would be meaningful to have industry-specific knowledge and solutions. Therefore, further studies are required in this field.

Conclusion

In summary, this study presented a model of relationships between the authenticity of clubs and top players' brands and attitudinal and behavioral loyalty toward football in general via the mediation of personal brand identification. The analysis of the presented mediations suggests that a clearer picture of the effects of brand authenticity could be gained by including other variables, such as perceived value and attitudes toward football players and clubs. Including these variables in the model would help obtain a comprehensive picture of the investigated relationships for the football industry. The authenticity of top football players' brands is important for the entire industry. The presented implications suggest that the ties between clubs and football players are complex and that extensive theoretical studies are required to understand the significance of personal brand authenticity. This study's key conclusion is that top players' authenticity is among the most crucial factors influencing loyalty in one of the most successful and profitable sports disciplines worldwide.

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Appendix 1

| Construct	Scale	Mean	Reliability
Personal brand authenticity (adapted from Moulard *et al.*, 2015)	This football celebrity is genuine. This football celebrity seems real to me. This football celebrity is authentic.	6.34	AVE = 0.592 Cronbach's alpha = 0.679 CR = 0.765
Personal brand identification (adapted from Stokburger-Sauer *et al.*, 2012)	I see myself as a fan of this player. I identify strongly with this player. Being a fan of this player is important to me.	5.37	AVE = 0.592 Cronbach's alpha = 0.785 CR = 0.812
Attitudinal loyalty (adapted from Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001)	I am committed to football. I intend to maintain interest in football. Changing my beliefs about football would be difficult.	5.98	AVE = 0.760 Cronbach's alpha = 0.769 CR = 0.904
Behavioral loyalty (adapted from Watson *et al.*, 2015)	I often buy products/services from Brand X. The last time I purchased a product/service, I bought from Brand X. I frequently buy from Brand X.	4.23	AVE = 0.518 Cronbach's alpha = 0.769 CR = 0.757

Figure 1
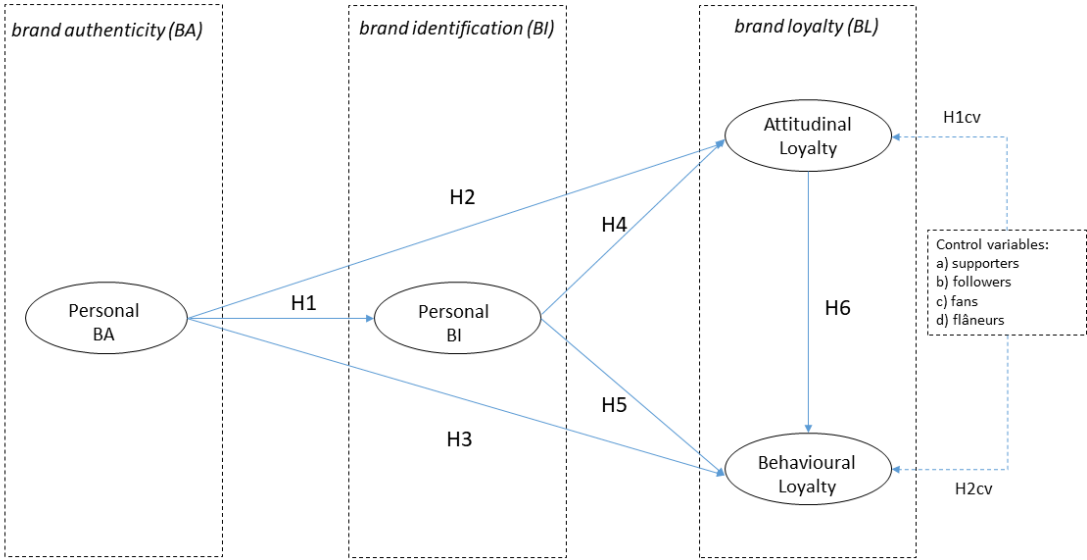
Figure 2
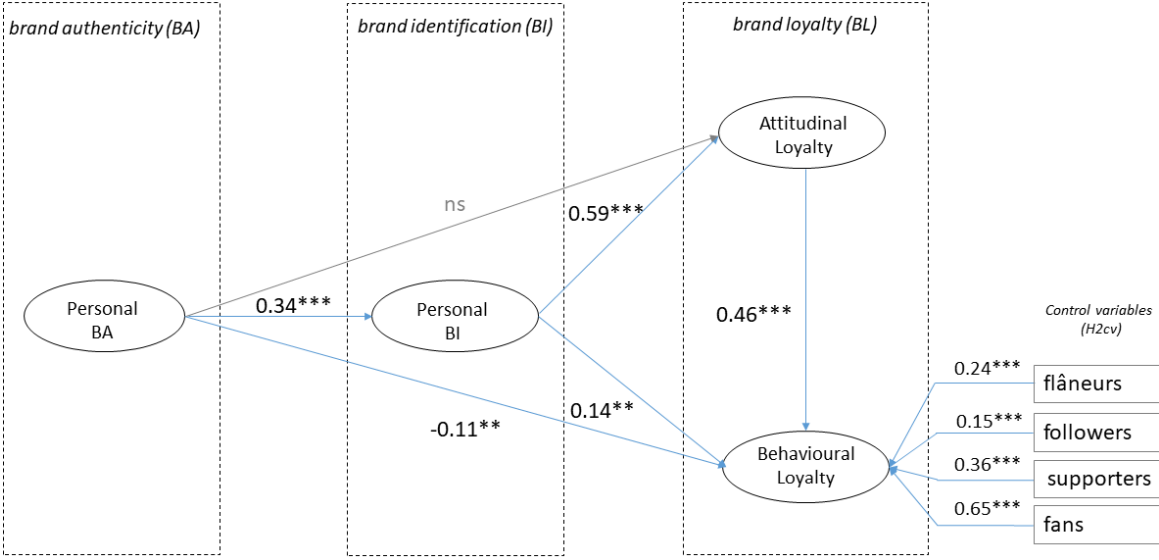
Figure 3
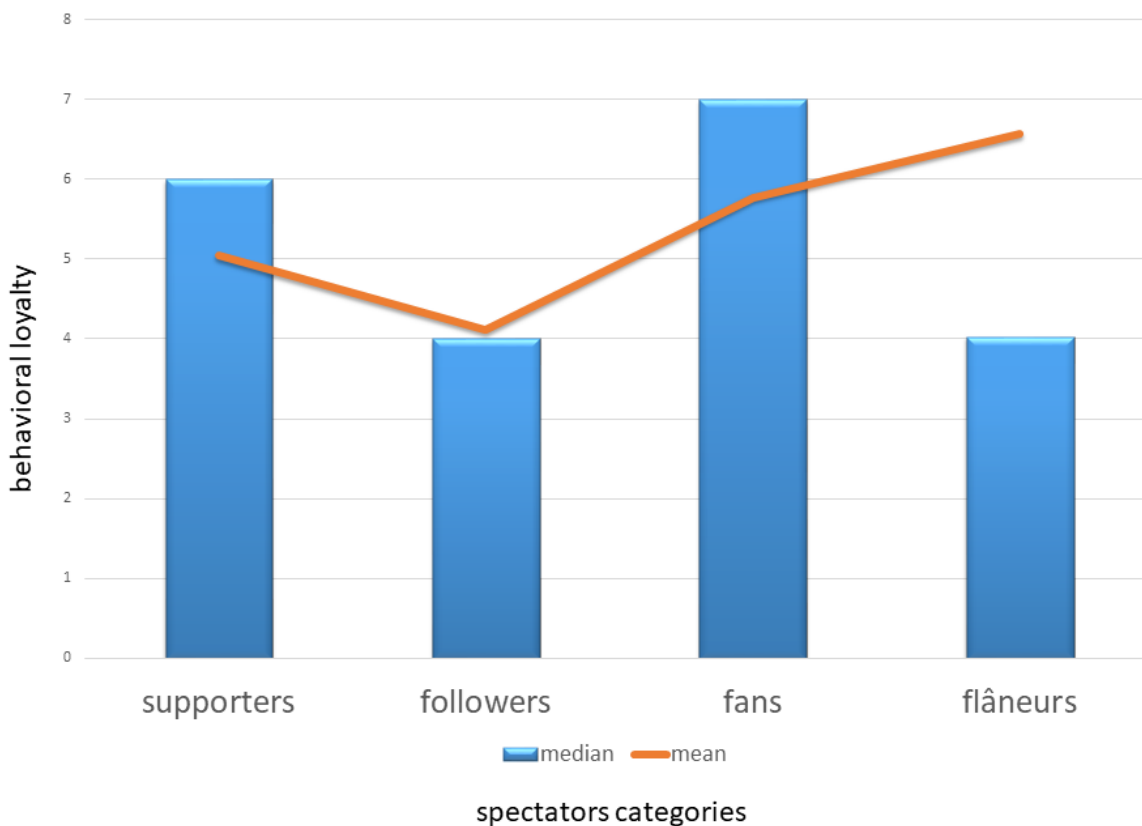
Table 1: Human brand, personal and authenticity of celebrity brand: definitions

construct	definition	source
Human brand	A well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communications effort.	Thomson (2006, p. 104)
	The warmth and competence perceptions are the universal foundation for all human behavior and relationships. Human brands apply them to all business relationships.	Malone and Fiske (2013)
	A brand that is perceived to be human.	Portal et al. (2018, p. 371)
Personal brand	A brand called YOU	Peters (1997)
	The personal brand is about recognizing who you are and what you do best, and communicating that to clients.	Hines (2004, p.60)
	An effect of managing an extended self.	Authors' own definition based on Belk

				(2013)
	A personal brand is an individual, intangible asset defined as a name of a real person combined with all the notions intended to identify and differentiate this person from others.			Kucharska (2018, p. 5)
Authenticity of the celebrity brand	The celebrity's authenticity is the perception that a celebrity behaves according to his or her true self.			Moulard et al. (2015, p. 175)
Authenticity of the football celebrity brand	The football celebrity's authentic brand is the audience perception that a top player reflects the originality, talent and professionalism, next to candidness and consistency of his/her behavior accordingly to his or her true self.			Authors' own definition

Table2: Factor correlation matrix with square root of the AVE on the diagonal.

variables	AVE	CR	Cronbach alpha	PBA	FCBA	FCBI	PBI	ABL	BBL
Personal Brand Authenticity **(PBA)**	0.592	0.765	0.679	**0.769**					
Footbal Club Brand Authenticity **(FCBA)**	0.643	0.844	0.84	0.085	**0.802**				
Footbal Club Brand Identification **(FCBI)**	0.666	0.856	0.848	0.141	0.808	**0.816**			
Personal Brand Identification **(PBI)**	0.592	0.812	0.785	0.403	0.675	0.673	**0.769**		
Attudinal Brand Loyalty **(ABL)**	0.760	0.904	0.933	0.253	0.528	0.545	0.679	**0.872**	
Behavioral Brand Loyalty **(BBL)**	0.518	0.757	0.769	0.138	0.753	0.843	0.6	0.667	**0.720**

Table 3: Results

Hypothesis		MODEL A (with CV)				MODEL B (without CV usage)			
		β	t-value	p-value	Hypothesis supported	β	t-value	p-value	Hypothesis supported
H1	The authenticity of a football player personal brand directly, positively influence on the identification with his/her personal brand	0.34	6.56	***	YES	0.35	6.68	***	YES
H2	The authenticity of a football player personal brand positively influences the attitudinal loyalty towards football	0.07	1.71	0.086	NO	0.06	1.43	0.15	NO
H3	The authenticity of a football player personal brand positively influences the behavioral loyalty towards football	-0.11	-2.69	**	NO	-0.16	-3.52	***	NO
H4	The identification with the personal brand of the player, positively influences the attitudinal loyalty towards football	0.59	9.23	***	YES	0.61	9.73	***	YES
H5	The identification with the personal brand of the player positively influences the behavioral loyalty towards football	0.14	2.59	**	YES	0.24	3.44	***	YES
H6	The attitudinal loyalty towards football directly leads to the behavioral loyalty	0.46	7.24	***	YES	0.57	8.15	***	YES
CVs	H2acv fans-> BBL	0.65	9.13	***	YES				
	H2bcv supporters-> BBL	0.36	4.01	***	YES		not applicable		
	H2ccv followers-> BBL	0.15	3.85	***	YES				
	H2dcv flâneurs-> BBL	0.24	4.59	***	YES				
Mediation	M1a	Direct effect		Indirect (mediated) effect		Direct effect		Indirect (mediated) effect	

analysis					
		0.06 (ns)	0.20 (***) full mediation	0.58 (ns)	0.22 (***) full mediation
	M1b	-0.11 (*)	0.17 (***) partial mediation (competitive)	-0.16 (**)	0.24 (***) partial mediation (competitive)
	M2	0.14 (**)	0.27 (***) partial mediation	0.24 (***)	0.35 (***) partial mediation
Goodness of model fit assessment		CHi-square=391.586 **CMIN/df**=4.6 df=85 **TLI**=.904 **CFI**=.932 **RMSEA**=.08 CI(.058-.071)		CHi-square=158,156 **CMIN/df**=3.51 df=45 **TLI**=.955 **CFI**=.969 **RMSEA**=.067 CI(.056-.078)	

Note: ML (maximum likehood), standardised estimates; * p< 0.05   ** p< 0.01; ***$p < 0.001$, n=562

BBL – behavioural brand loyalty