



The Role of Social Media in Stimulating Fan Engagement and its Impact on Brand Equity in Sports Teams

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Abstract

Social media has completely changed how sports teams engage with their fans, giving them new ways to communicate, build fan loyalty, and build brand equity. This study looks at social media's function as a major fan engagement driver and how it affects sports teams' brand equity. A quantitative method was used to gather information from sports fans who were actively following their teams on different social media sites. The study analyses the connections between brand image, fan engagement, and social media engagement by applying structural equation modelling. The study's conclusions demonstrate how social media's personal identification, entertainment, knowledge, and social contact greatly increase sports fans' involvement with teams. However, the investigation did not support the idea that fan participation increases brand awareness. These insights emphasize how crucial social media tactics are to this study. These findings demonstrate the significant role that social media tactics have in fostering fan interactions and influencing consumer opinions of brands. The study's conclusion shows that social media's collaborative and interactive features can support novel, targeted, and more "social" enhancements.

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مجلة الرافدين للعلوم الرياضية

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دور وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي في تحفيز تفاعل المشجعين وتأثيره على قيمة العلامة التجارية للفرق

الرياضية

الباحث:

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وزارة التعليم العالي والبحث العلمي/ دائرة الدراسات والتخطيط والمتابعة

معلومات الارشفة	الملخص
تاريخ الاستلام: ٢٠٢٦ / ٥ / ٤	لقد غيرت وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي بشكل جذري الطريقة التي تتفاعل بها الفرق الرياضية مع مشجعيها، حيث وفرت لها طرقاً جديدة للتواصل، وتعزيز ولاء المشجعين، وبناء قيمة العلامة التجارية. تتناول هذه الدراسة دور وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي باعتبارها محركاً رئيسياً لتفاعل المشجعين، وكيفية تأثيرها على قيمة العلامة التجارية للفرق الرياضية. تم استخدام طريقة كمية لجمع المعلومات من مشجعي الرياضة الذين كانوا يتابعون فرقهم بنشاط على مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي المختلفة. تحلل الدراسة الروابط بين صورة العلامة التجارية، وتفاعل المشجعين، والتفاعل عبر وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي من خلال تطبيق نمذجة المعادلات الهيكلية. توضح استنتاجات الدراسة كيف أن الهوية الشخصية، والترفيه، والمعرفة، والتواصل الاجتماعي عبر وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي تزيد بشكل كبير من مشاركة مشجعي الرياضة مع الفرق. ومع ذلك، لم تدعم الدراسة فكرة أن مشاركة المشجعين تزيد من الوعي بالعلامة التجارية. تؤكد هذه الرؤى على مدى أهمية استراتيجيات وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي في هذه الدراسة. توضح هذه النتائج الدور الهام الذي تلعبه استراتيجيات وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي في تعزيز تفاعلات المشجعين والتأثير على آراء المستهلكين تجاه العلامات التجارية. تظهر استنتاجات الدراسة أن الميزات التعاونية والتفاعلية لوسائل التواصل الاجتماعي يمكن أن تدعم دوافع جديدة وموجهة وأكثر "اجتماعية".
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1- Introduction

1-1 Introduction and Significance of the Research:

Social media platforms such as Twitter/X and Instagram enable rapid communication and information sharing among geographically distant users, significantly influencing tourists' destination decision-making processes [1]. One important characteristic of this development is the integration of passive media consumption, such as watching sporting events, with active participation through social networking platforms. During major sports events, audiences increasingly experience a sense of social connectedness and interaction through online engagement and real-time communication [2]. Social media platforms have enhanced users' ability to communicate instantly with geographically distant individuals, creating new dimensions of social presence and online interaction research. Through embedded social signals and interactive features, contemporary social networking sites facilitate stronger social connectedness and real-time engagement among users during sports communication and media consumption[3]. Thanks to social media sites like Twitter, users can now interact with a wider variety of mediated interactions. One significant aspect of this tendency is the convergence of spectatorship and virtual interactions that occurs when passive behavior—such as watching television—coexists with actively engaged behavior—such as using social networking sites (SNSs)[4]. In connecting with others online [5], during major sporting events, social media platforms enhance fans' feelings of social connectedness by enabling continuous interaction and the formation of online fan communities [6]. This sense of social connectedness is strengthened by the interactive features and social signals embedded within contemporary social networking sites (SNSs), which facilitate communication, participation, and relationship-building among users. Fan involvement represents a fundamental component of sport relationship management, receiving considerable attention from both sport industry practitioners and academic researchers because of its influence on loyalty, engagement, and organizational success [7]. Fans often develop strong emotional attachments and close psychological bonds with their favorite teams, which can lead to supportive behaviors that positively influence the team, its management, and the broader fan community. Therefore, understanding the relationship between fan behavior and sport marketing activities is essential for enhancing fan engagement and organizational effectiveness [8]. Fan interaction is a unique form of consumer connection in sports. Recent sport marketing literature highlights that professional sport teams strategically build brand equity through fan identification, emotional attachment, and long-term engagement processes that strengthen supporters' behavioral intentions

Yoshida, [9]. or measured Biscaia, [10]. Many academics have used social identity-based identification to study how single, specific objectives of identification affect the brands or brand equity of sports teams in different sports contexts [11]. However, these researchers have looked at how different identification aims, rather than working together, increase the brand equity of athletic organizations in the competitive sports arena. Given that individuals can increase their identification with many targets, sports fans increasingly tend to regard team brands as potential identification targets in addition to the sports team itself. Managers must thus be aware that these two goals of identification from different sports fans may coexist while developing the brand equity of sports teams.

1-2 Research Problem:

The growing reliance of sports teams on social media has transformed their fan connection tactics by opening up new avenues for brand promotion and communication. Yet, little is acknowledged about the precise dynamics of how social media promotes fan interaction and how that affects brand equity. Research such as Doyle [12], and Weimar [13] shed light on the kinds of communication tactics and content that fans find appealing, the unfavorable responses to certain sponsor-related content, and the erratic results of engagement tactics. Moreover, the research conducted by Yim [14], and Yun [15]. provide insight into the variations in fan behavior over generations and the relationship between engagement, satisfaction, and loyalty. However, these studies do not completely take into consideration the changing function of platforms like Instagram and Facebook in shaping these relationships. This gap implies that, in order to encourage more fans to engage, as well as enhance the brand equity of sports teams, in-depth research will be necessary to investigate the compatibility of different social media strategies with the self-presentation theory.

1-3 Research Objectives:

The principal aim of this research is to explore the influence of social media activity on fans' interaction with their sports teams, and the impact of fan engagement on the brand equity of the sports team. The objective of the study addresses the associated research questions:

- Examine the influence of information shared on social media on fan engagement with sports teams.
- Explore the influence of personal identity on social media on fan engagement with sports teams.
- Determine the influence of social interaction on social media on fan engagement with sports teams.

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- Evaluate the influence of the entertainment offered on social media on fan engagement with sports teams.
- Analyze the influence of fan engagement on the brand image of sports teams.
- Explore the influence of fan engagement on the brand awareness of sports teams.

1-4 Research Questions

- RQ1: Does information exchanged via social media positively influence fan engagement with sports teams?
- RQ2: Is personal identity on social media positively influencing fan engagement with sports teams?
- RQ3: Is social interaction on social media positively influencing fan engagement with sports teams?
- RQ4: Is entertainment on social media positively influencing fan engagement with sports teams?
- RQ5: Is fan engagement positively influencing the brand image of sports teams?
- RQ6: Is fan engagement positively influencing brand awareness of sports teams?

1-5 Research Hypotheses

While an analytical framework is employed to define the related subject themes that are the subject matter of empirical inquiry, a comprehensive literature scan produces comparisons as well as findings that reflect the context of the examination and methodological capabilities (Figure 2).

- H1: Information on social media has a positive impact on fan engagement with sports teams.
- H2: Personal Identity on social media has a positive effect on fan engagement with sports teams.
- H3: Social interaction on social media has a positive impact on fan engagement with sports teams.
- H4: Entertainment on social media positively impacts fan engagement with sports teams.
- H5: Fan engagement has an impact on the brand image of sports teams.
- H6: Fan engagement has an impact on the brand awareness of sports teams.

Adoption of social media by sports teams has revolutionized the communication and relationship management processes. However, little is known about the effect of certain social media activities such as information sharing, personal identity, social interaction and entertainment on fan engagement and how this engagement affects the brand equity of sports teams. The current study aims to answer the following principal research question:

"How do social media activities affect fan engagement, and what is the impact of fan engagement on the brand equity of sports teams?"

2- Literature Review

2-1 The Study of (Ahiabor et al. 2023). Satellite fans engagement with social networking sites influence on sport team brand equity. [16]

explored the impact of behaviors relating to social network sites (SNS) engagement on the brand equity of sports teams by applying the framework of Uses and Gratifications Theory. The main aim of the study was to assess the impact of consumer engagement behaviors comprising consuming, contributing, and creating behavior on the brand equity of sports teams. A quantitative research design was applied in the study, where data were obtained from 347 respondents who followed their favorite sports teams on SNSs. Data were collected through structured questionnaire surveys conducted among SNS followers. Empirical data were analyzed using PLS-SEM. The results showed that the needs of football fans for gratification from SNSs had an enormous impact on consumer engagement behavior. Besides, consuming and contributing engagement behavior had a considerable positive impact on brand equity of sports teams.

2-2 The Study of (Winell, 2023). Exploring antecedents and outcomes of customer engagement among elite football fans.[17]

The antecedents and consequences of customer engagement among elite football fans have been analyzed by Winell (2023). The purpose of the research was to explore the factors and consequences of two types of customer engagement, specifically, customer engagement with football clubs (CEF) and customer engagement with other consumers (CEC). A quantitative methodology was used, and the data were gathered using a survey from 2,031 elite football fans in Sweden. The structured questionnaire was used as a tool for data gathering. The analysis was performed with the help of Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to determine the links between study variables. The obtained results showed that customer engagement with other consumers (CEC) had a more significant effect on word-of-mouth communication and customer loyalty compared to customer engagement with football clubs (CEF).

2-3 The Study of (Lee et al, 2024). Green consumer behavior of sports enthusiasts on TikTok- An analysis of the moderating effect of green concern.[18]

explored the impact of green brand image on consumers' stickiness, purchasing intent, and green word-of-mouth (WOM) in sports enthusiasts. The purpose of the research was to investigate the relationships between green brand image and consumers' behavioral variables, evaluating the impact of the moderating variable – green concern. To achieve this purpose, the study used a quantitative survey research design including 600 fans of the Taipei Fubon Braves basketball club and other P. LEAGUE+ clubs in Taiwan. Data were

collected by means of a structured questionnaire applied to sports fans. The hypotheses were tested with the help of Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The results revealed a significant positive influence among green brand image, consumers' stickiness, purchasing intent, and green WOM. Besides, green concern served as a moderator of the relationship between green WOM and purchase intention among the fans of the Taipei Fubon Braves basketball club. The studies revealed the importance of brand image for consumers' engagement and their behavioral intention. All three studies mentioned above are very relevant as they address social media engagement, fan behavior, customer engagement, and brand equity.

3- Research Procedures:

3-1 Research Methodology:

The research technique used in the study titled Social Media as a Driver of Fan Engagement and Its Effect on Brand Equity in Sports Teams is supposed to be quantifiable. Quantitative methods were used to collect information that will be used to analyze it. The survey was publicized in various ways, such as weekly emails, official team internet pages, and social interaction platforms, e.g. Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. A representative sample and higher engagement were guaranteed by this multi-channel approach.

3-2 Data Collection:

To compile statistics to be used in this analysis an online poll that targeted Indian football enthusiasts was used to assemble statistics. Our study ensured that a large sample of the fan base was represented by conducting an online poll to collect a sample that was geographically spread and diverse. The poll was posted on various platforms, such as weekly emails on the official team site and social broadcasting sites, including Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. The multi-channel approach guaranteed a representative sample and enhanced interest. Comparing the demographics of the respondents with the total number of fans of the sports teams of interest ensured the representativeness of the sample. Some of the demographics collected and analyzed included age, gender, and level of education to ensure that they matched the characteristics of the fan base of the teams. This comparison provided confidence that the results could be generalized to the overall fan base by assuring that the sample was representative of the larger fan group.

3-3 Research Design & Approach:

By evaluating the respondents' demographic traits with the overall fan base of the sports teams under consideration in the study, the representativeness of the sample was guaranteed. Demographic information was collected and analyzed to ensure that they were in line with the demographics of the fans of the clubs. This comparison provided confidence that the findings could be

generalized to the entire fan base since it was seen that the sample mirrored the entire fan base.

3-4 Design of Sample:

To gather data for this paper, an online survey was conducted among Indian football fans. Through an online poll, this study was in a position to reach a geographically diverse and widely spread sample that ensured a wide representation of the fan base. The survey was shared through various platforms such as official team web pages, weekly emails, and communal broadcasting platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. This multi-channel approach guaranteed a representative sample and greater interaction. This research uses a convenience sampling technique. The questionnaire items to be adopted in this report were modified based on previous studies to look at the key elements. The questions on the survey used in this study were modified to suit the prevailing situation. A Likert scale of five points was used to rate the issues, where 1 denoted "strongly disapprove" and 5 meant "strongly agree."

3-4-1 Sample Description

The proportion of users' detailed responses is displayed in Table 2. There were 751 respondents. The age distribution of the sample of respondents indicates that they are mostly young, with 43.4% being between the ages of 18 and 24 and a small percentage being under 18 (8.7%) or over 55 (1.7%). 34.5% of the sample is female, 61.1% is male, and 4.4% is not sure of their gender. In terms of education, a sizable portion of fans (42.2%) hold diplomas or certificates, followed by undergraduates (26.1%), postgraduates (15.7%), and relatively few (2.8%) with doctorates. 14.5% of people are students, 14.9% are jobless or retired, and 61.5% are self-employed or entrepreneurs. The largest percentage of respondents (40.5%) came from East India, followed by North India (10.5%) and South India (7.3%). The data shows that 61.8% of fans only use social media to connect at major events, compared to 14.9% who use it daily, 12.9% who use it weekly, and 10.4% who use it monthly. Thus, it is proof that large events are the main basis for fan interaction on social media. In conclusion, this kind of description demonstrates that most sports teams have youthful, picky customers who are also primarily male-dominated and enterprising. They primarily participate in important sporting events, offering helpful information for the development of focused social media campaigns.

Table 1: Respondents demographic details

Variables	Items	Frequency Values	Percentage
Age Group	Below 18 years	65	8.7
	18-24 years	326	43.4
	35-44 years	180	24.0
	45-54 years	167	22.2
	55 years & above	13	1.7
Gender	Male	459	61.1
	Female	259	34.5
	Not prefer to say	33	4.4
Education Qualifications	Secondary Education (up to 12th grade)	99	13.2
	Diploma/ Certificate Course	317	42.2
	Undergraduate Degree	196	26.1
	Postgraduate Degree	118	15.7
	Doctorate	21	2.8
Occupation	Student	109	14.5
	Private Sector	16	2.1
	Public Sector	52	6.9
	Self-Employed/Business Owner	462	61.5
	Unemployed/Retired	112	14.9
Residence Region	North India	79	10.5
	South India	55	7.3
	Central India	125	16.6
	East India	304	40.5
	West India	188	25
Frequency	Daily	112	14.9
	Weekly	97	12.9
	Monthly	78	10.4
	Only during Major tournaments	464	61.8

3-5 Instrumentation of Research:

The assessment mechanism's requirements were modified from previous research to fit the requirements of this investigation. The primary constructs of the study include information, personal identity, social connection, amusement, brand image, recognition of the brand, and fan engagement. Using an appropriate standardized five-point Likert scale, with one signifying "strongly disagree" and five denoting "strongly agree," the aspects were measured in this analysis. It carried out a comprehensive review of the literature and based our strategy on earlier research. Four main components made up the test, the first

of which focused on the participants' origins and the traits of their businesses. To be able to assess information, one's identity, social behavior, cultural activities, image of the company, brand awareness, and fan engagement, five criteria from the source material were adapted for the second section.

3-6 Research Tools:

To investigate the hypotheses, this investigation uses the SEM method with the SPSS and AMOS software programs. First, the measurement model was examined. The structural model is then examined using path analysis and regression. Investigators will be able to examine relationships between hidden variables and visible indicators by employing this technique, providing crucial new insights into the underlying constructs and their effects on the proposed model. A thorough investigation was carried out to guarantee the study's applicability, beginning with an evaluation of reliability to validate the measurement items' consistency. Testing whether the data distribution was normal was the next step in the process of evaluating the data distribution. A calculation pattern was validated, and construct validity was proved with the help of the measurement model, also known as CFA. To ensure that the model fit was adequate to proceed with further testing, the Analysis of Fit Indices was used to assess the total model fit. Lastly, the linkages between the separate variables and their effects on the variable of interest were evaluated by AMOS/SPSS's Inner Model Evaluation utilizing Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). This strategy emphasized the crucial elements and their proportional significance in affecting sports teams' image equity.

4- Presentation, Analysis and Discussion of the Results:

4-1 Structural Model:

In the second phase, the structural model was evaluated to examine the proposed relationships among the study constructs. Model fit indices, including the Standardized Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), were employed to assess model adequacy. The RMSEA value was below the recommended threshold of 0.08, indicating an acceptable model fit. The results were subsequently presented in tabular form and graphical path diagrams to facilitate interpretation of the hypothesized relationships.

The hypothesis testing results revealed that Information (INFO.) had a significant positive effect on Fan Engagement (ENGE.) ($\beta = 1.932$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, H1 was supported, confirming that information shared through social media positively influences fan engagement with sports teams.

Similarly, Personal Identity (IDENT.) exerted a positive and statistically significant influence on Fan Engagement (ENGE.) ($\beta = 0.153$, $p < 0.001$). Consequently, H2 was supported, indicating that personal identity on social media positively affects fan engagement.

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Social Interaction (INTE.) also demonstrated a positive and significant relationship with Fan Engagement (ENGE.) ($\beta = 0.060$, $p = 0.035$). Hence, H3 was supported, suggesting that social interaction through social media positively contributes to fan engagement, although the effect size was relatively modest.

Entertainment (ENTR.) significantly influenced Fan Engagement (ENGE.) ($\beta = 0.288$, $p < 0.001$). Accordingly, H4 was supported, confirming that entertainment provided through social media positively enhances fan engagement with sports teams.

The findings further indicated that Fan Engagement (ENGE.) had a strong and statistically significant positive effect on Brand Image (IMGE.) ($\beta = 0.702$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, H5 was supported, demonstrating that fan engagement positively influences the brand image of sports teams.

However, the relationship between Fan Engagement (ENGE.) and Brand Awareness (AWAR.) was not statistically significant ($\beta = 0.148$, $CR = 1.827$, $p = 0.068$). Thus, H6 was not supported, indicating that fan engagement does not significantly influence brand awareness in the present study.

Figure 1 illustrates the direct effects for H1–H4, whereas Figure 2 presents the direct effects related to H5 and H6.

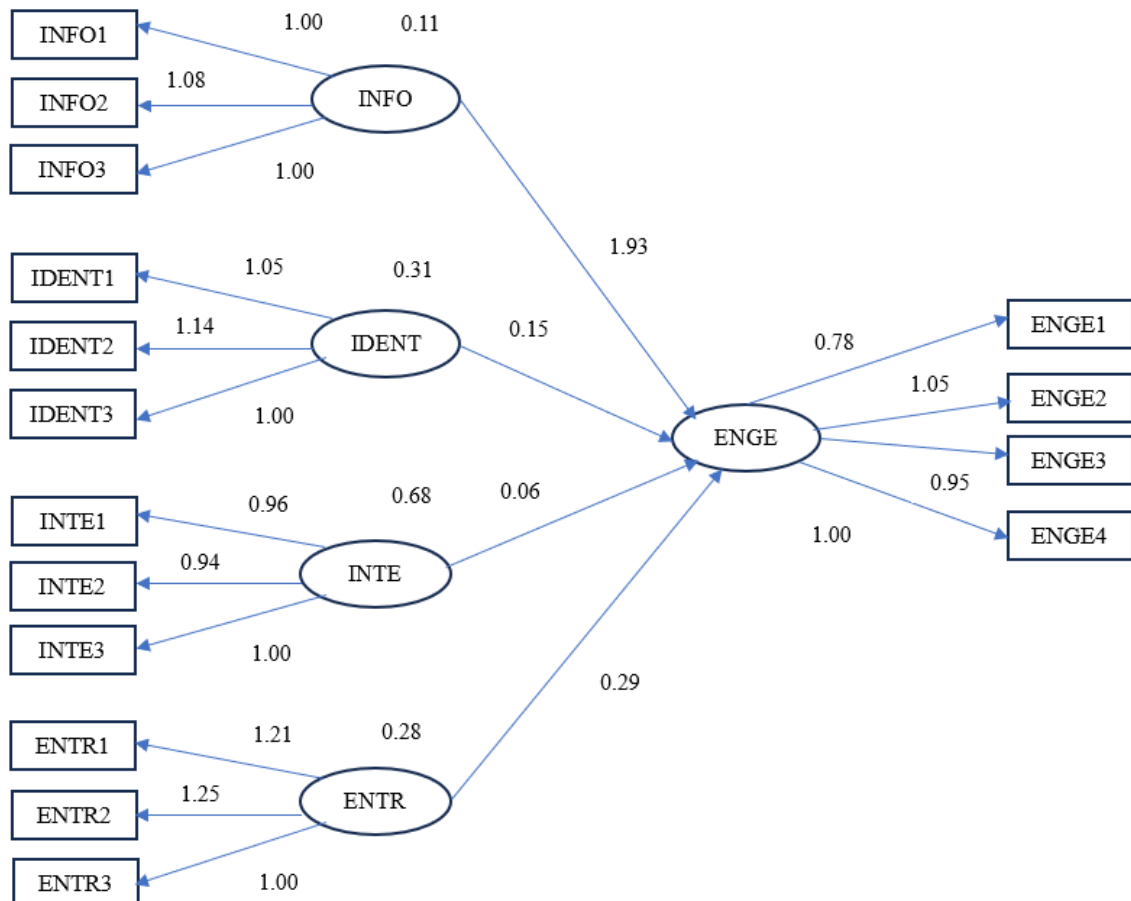


Figure 1: Direct effect Model of H1 to H4

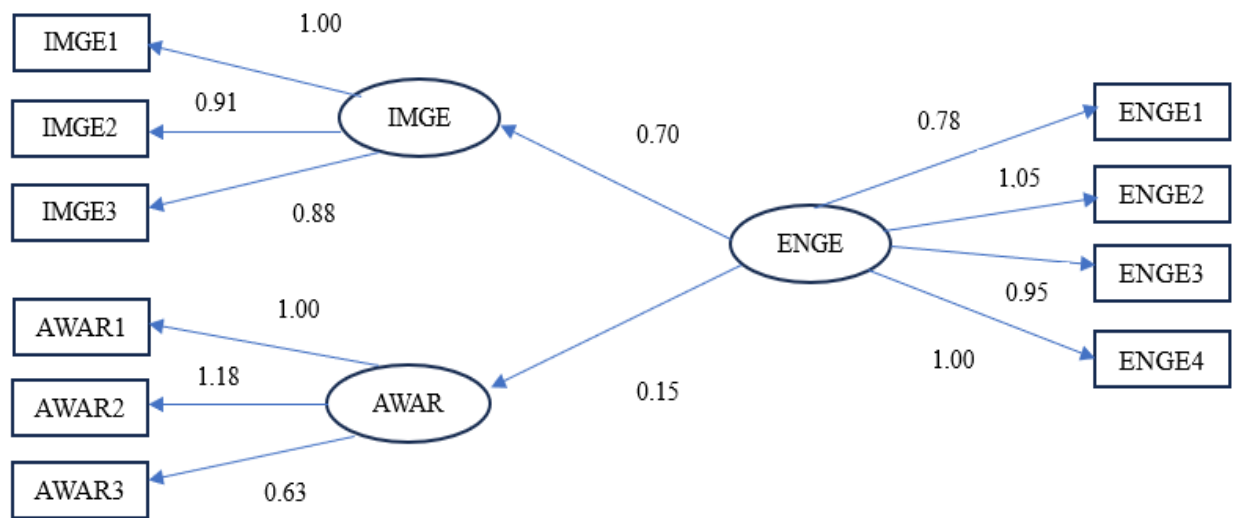


Figure 2: H5 and H6 Direct Effect Models

4-2 Discussion:

The findings of the current study empirically validate the proposed structural model and present a holistic view of fan engagement in social media environments within the sports industry. It has been found out that fan engagement is a multi-faceted construct affected by a number of factors such as informational, psychological, social, and enhancement-related ones.

Specifically, it was revealed that information disseminated via social media is the strongest predictor of fan engagement. The significant positive correlation between information and engagement indicates that the information disseminated via social media stimulates fans' interest in engaging with their favorite sports teams. This result highlights the importance of disseminating informative content as one of the effective strategies for encouraging fan participation and building strong connections between sports organizations and their fans. These results align with previous findings, showing that high-quality information can promote user engagement in online communities.

The current research has also confirmed the positive influence of identification on fan engagement. Even though the strength of the correlation was relatively weak, the findings have indicated that the psychological factor is important for explaining fan behavior. Fans' psychological attachment and similarity with their sports teams are factors that facilitate their engagement in online communities.

It was also found that social interaction is an important but relatively weaker factor affecting fan engagement. That is, fan engagement through activities such as likes, comments, and sharing of posts does occur. However, such engagement does not contribute much to behavioral involvement on the part of fans.

Moreover, the enhancement factors had a significant positive impact on fan engagement. In this case, it can be concluded that factors such as creativity,

innovation, and entertainment in the use of social media have great potential to increase fan participation.

Additionally, fan engagement has proven to have a significant positive effect on the brand image of sports teams. Thus, there is a close relation between fan engagement and such aspects as perception, attachment and evaluation of sports teams. In general, fan engagement can be regarded as an effective strategy aimed at improving the brand image of sports organizations.

However, fan engagement has not been found to have any significant effect on brand awareness. There is no significant relation between these two variables. This means fan engagement activities alone cannot make any contributions to brand awareness. Factors such as exposure, communication frequency, promotion and market visibility may matter more for brand awareness than fan engagement. Thus, despite the fact that fan engagement can improve brand image, it does not have any significant impact on brand awareness within the framework of this study.

In conclusion, it can be noted that fan engagement is a complex concept that has different effects on brand-related aspects. These aspects include the enhancement of brand image and brand awareness. Fan engagement is especially beneficial for the improvement of sports teams' brand image.

5- Conclusions and Recommendations:

5-1 Conclusions:

The current research analyzed the effects of social media on fan engagement and its relationship with the brand equity of sports teams. It has been found that factors of information, personal identification, social interaction, and enhancement play an important role in the process of fan engagement among sports fans.

Out of all these factors, information turned out to be the most influential in relation to fan engagement, highlighting the importance of delivering relevant information via social media. The research proved that fan engagement plays an important role in the development of the brand image of sports teams. Nevertheless, no significant effects of fan engagement on brand awareness have been observed.

Thus, overall, the research proves that social media platforms are useful instruments for fan management and brand image improvement in the sphere of sports. Also, it has been found out that fan engagement acts as an important mediator between social media and brand equity of sports teams.

5-2 Recommendations:

Considering the results of the research, the following recommendations can be suggested:

- Sports organizations are required to continually disseminate reliable and up-to-date information via social media platforms in order to facilitate fan engagement.
- The sports teams are expected to develop certain strategies that would help them improve fans' emotional attachment to their respective teams.
- The social media managers have to involve people in various interactive activities, including discussions, comments, voting, and fan-generated content.

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- Sports organizations need to consistently produce new entertaining and engaging content in order to maintain fans' engagement.
- The managers have to pay particular attention to the implementation of engagement strategies for the purpose of enhancing the brand image by means of interaction with fans.
- Sports teams have to combine fan engagement strategies with other promotional and communicational campaigns in order to achieve greater brand awareness.
- Sports organizations need to implement integrated social media strategies that take into consideration both information dissemination, interaction, entertainment, and relationship building.

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