

1 **More than Performance: Configurational Paths from Footballer Brand Image to Fans'**  
2 **Emotional Attachment and Brand-Related Intentions**

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4  
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7

8 **Abstract**

9 **Purpose:** This study examines how distinct dimensions of professional football players' brand  
10 image influence fans' emotional attachment, and how this attachment subsequently affects fans'  
11 behavioral intentions toward brands endorsed by those players.

12 **Methodology:** Using data from 638 Spanish football fans, the study applies structural equation  
13 modeling (SEM) and fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) to assess the impact  
14 of specific on-field and off-field brand image dimensions on fans' emotional attachment. A  
15 dimension-level approach was adopted to capture the unique effects of each dimension, while  
16 some were subsequently grouped during the analysis phase for technical validity and analytical  
17 parsimony.

18 **Findings:** SEM results show that fans feel more attached to players excelling on the field, acting  
19 as team-oriented leaders, and sharing compelling life stories. Conversely, an emphasis on  
20 physical appearance was negatively associated with emotional attachment. Fans' emotional  
21 attachment, in turn, had a strong positive effect on behavioral intentions. fsQCA identified two  
22 alternative pathways to strong fans' emotional attachment: one based on outstanding  
23 performance and emotional storytelling, and another driven by ethical conduct and relational  
24 warmth.

25 **Implications:** The findings challenge assumptions that aesthetic appeal enhances fan  
26 engagement and highlights the importance of authentic narratives and ethical behavior in  
27 building emotional bonds. The study offers new insights for clubs, sponsors, and athletes  
28 seeking to cultivate meaningful and sustainable fan relationships.

29 **Keywords:** Football player brand image; Fan’s emotional attachment; Football marketing;  
30 SEM; fsQCA

### 31 **Introduction**

32 Football stands as the most followed sport worldwide, captivating more than 40% of the  
33 global population, far ahead of any other discipline. Its cultural and economic significance is  
34 particularly pronounced in Europe, where the “big five” leagues—Spain, Italy, Germany, the  
35 UK, and France—attract over 130 million fans (Nielsen, 2018). Beyond its competitive appeal,  
36 football has become a global entertainment platform that influences consumer trends, media  
37 discourse, and social identity.

38 At the core of this phenomenon are elite footballers, whose visibility and influence extend  
39 far beyond the pitch. Figures such as Kylian Mbappé, Lionel Messi, and Cristiano Ronaldo  
40 exemplify the modern athlete as a multifaceted cultural icon. These players drive revenue  
41 through merchandise, sponsorships, and media exposure, while also shaping fashion, activism,  
42 and digital engagement. Their celebrity-like status makes them valuable strategic assets for  
43 clubs, sponsors, and global brands (Arai *et al.*, 2013; Parmentier & Fischer, 2012).

44 This growing symbolic and commercial relevance raises a critical research question: how  
45 does the multidimensional brand image of football players shape fans’ emotional attachment  
46 and their willingness to engage with brands these players endorse?

47 Despite their global visibility, the specific impact of footballers' brand image on fan  
48 outcomes remains underexplored. While existing studies link athlete brand image to loyalty and  
49 purchase intentions (Bush *et al.*, 2004; Carlson & Donovan, 2013), most research has focused  
50 on team branding (Koo, 2009; Nufer *et al.*, 2017) or conceptualized athlete brands as  
51 homogeneous entities (Arai *et al.*, 2013; Zarkada & Tzoumaka, 2020). Although elite players  
52 are widely recognized as influential brand figures (Kunkel *et al.*, 2019), little is known about  
53 how discrete dimensions—such as technical skill, ethical behavior, or physical appearance—  
54 affect fan perceptions and behaviors.

55 Recent scholarship (Mahmoudian *et al.*, 2021; Väättäinen & Dickenson, 2019) emphasizes  
56 the value of a dimension-level approach to better understand how different aspects of an  
57 athlete's image shape fans' emotional bonds and behavioral intentions. This perspective aligns  
58 with the increasingly strategic use of player branding in sports marketing and sponsorship.

59 To address these gaps, this study makes three key contributions. First, it applies a dimension-  
60 specific perspective to assess how distinct on-field and off-field brand image attributes  
61 influence fans' emotional attachment through structural equation modeling (SEM)  
62 (Mahmoudian *et al.*, 2021; Väättäinen & Dickenson, 2019). Second, it incorporates a  
63 configurational perspective through fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA),  
64 revealing multiple pathways to fans' emotional attachment (Fiss, 2011; Greckhamer *et al.*,  
65 2008). The combination of fsQCA and SEM allows for the identification of asymmetric effects  
66 often overlooked by traditional linear approaches (Leischnig & Kasper-Brauer, 2015;  
67 Woodside, 2013). Third, it broadens the empirical scope by including both male and female  
68 players from top European leagues, offering a more inclusive view of footballer branding  
69 (Kunkel *et al.*, 2019).

70 The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: first, a review of the relevant literature  
71 and development of hypotheses; second, the methodology; third, the presentation of results; and  
72 finally, a discussion of theoretical contributions and managerial implications.

### 73 **Theoretical Framework**

74 This study draws on brand equity theory (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993) and measurement  
75 theory (Edwards, 2001) to examine how football players' brand image influences fans' attitudes  
76 and intentional behaviors, providing a conceptual and methodological foundation for assessing  
77 brand dimensions.

#### 78 *Brand Equity Theory and the Athlete Brand Image*

79 Brand equity theory has long provided the foundation for understanding consumer  
80 responses to brand attributes and associations (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). According to Keller  
81 (1993), brand equity arises from the differential effect that brand knowledge exerts on consumer  
82 responses, influencing perceptions, preferences, and behaviors. Within this framework,  
83 consumer-based brand equity emphasizes the centrality of brand associations stored in memory  
84 in shaping consumer decision-making.

85 In sport management, the athlete-as-brand framework conceptualizes athlete brand image  
86 (ABI) as a multidimensional model encompassing athletic performance, attractive appearance,  
87 and marketable lifestyle (Arai *et al.*, 2013, 2014). These aspects capture both on-field and off-  
88 field traits, shaping fan perceptions. As elite players increasingly act as cultural icons and brand  
89 ambassadors (Kunkel *et al.*, 2019; Parmentier *et al.*, 2013), understanding their brand image is  
90 crucial.

91 Importantly, the relevance of ABI extends beyond image formation to tangible fan  
92 outcomes such as loyalty, emotional attachment, and consumer behavior (Bush *et al.*, 2004;

93 Kunkel *et al.*, 2019; Mahmoudian *et al.*, 2021). These outcomes are particularly salient in  
94 football, where individual players exert considerable influence over fan engagement and brand  
95 affiliations. However, existing research has typically treated ABI as a higher-order construct,  
96 potentially masking the distinct effects of specific dimensions.

97 While this study builds upon the conceptual foundations of ABI, it focuses specifically on  
98 the context of professional football. Given the sport’s distinctive cultural relevance, fan  
99 dynamics, and commercial structures, we refer to the adapted construct used in this research as  
100 football player brand image (FPBI). This adaptation retains the multidimensional structure of  
101 ABI but reconceptualizes specific dimensions—such as “team-oriented behavior” or  
102 “rivalry”—to reflect the symbolic and emotional traits most salient in elite football. In addition,  
103 the measurement items for each dimension were carefully reworded to reflect the language,  
104 values, and scenarios relevant to football fans, enhancing both content validity and ecological  
105 relevance. This contextual refinement supports more accurate and meaningful assessment of  
106 fan perceptions within the football context.

### 107 ***Operationalization of Football Player Brand Image: A Dimension-Level Approach***

108 This study adopts a dimension-level operationalization of FPBI, following Väättäinen and  
109 Dickenson (2019). Grounded in classical measurement theory, this approach suggests assessing  
110 multifaceted constructs by their specific dimensions, as aggregating them into a single factor  
111 may obscure distinct predictive effects (Edwards, 2001).

112 Recent work suggests that constructs with distinct facets—like athletic expertise or  
113 relationship-building—should be analyzed independently (Väättäinen & Dickenson, 2019). This  
114 dimension-level approach helps identify which dimensions most resonate with fans, providing  
115 actionable insights for brand strategy.

116 Integrating brand equity theory with a dimension-based approach, this study refines the  
117 understanding of football player branding and its impact on fan outcomes. It operationalizes  
118 fans' emotional attachment as *football player attachment* (FPA), understood as an affective and  
119 enduring emotional bond that fans form with individual football players, rooted in personal  
120 identification, admiration, and affective resonance (Stokburger-Sauer *et al.*, 2012).

121 While the term "attachment" can encompass both emotional and cognitive components in  
122 psychology and consumer research, our focus is specifically on its emotional dimension, in line  
123 with sport marketing literature that emphasizes feelings of closeness, loyalty, and identification  
124 as core drivers of fan–athlete relationships (Funk & James, 2006; Thompson *et al.*, 2005).

125 Fans' behavioral intentions are defined as *endorsed brand behavioral intentions* (EBBI),  
126 referring to fans' self-reported likelihood to engage in specific actions such as considering,  
127 purchasing, or recommending brands endorsed by football players to whom they feel  
128 emotionally attached. Rather than capturing general purchase intentions, EBBI reflects a  
129 sponsorship-related behavioral response rooted in the affective connection between the fan and  
130 the player. This link has been shown to increase endorsement effectiveness through enhanced  
131 credibility, internalized identification, and symbolic brand transfer (Liu *et al.*, 2020; Ohanian,  
132 1991).

## 133 **Literature Review and Hypotheses Development**

### 134 ***Fan Outcomes: Emotional Attachment and Behavioral Intentions***

135 A fan is defined as an individual who identifies as a supporter of a team, athlete, or sport  
136 (Dietz-Uhler *et al.*, 2000). In football, strong fanbases can enhance players' value beyond  
137 athletic performance, as exemplified by figures like David Beckham (Vincent *et al.*, 2009).

138 Emotional attachment refers to the bond, affinity, and loyalty fans develop toward football  
139 players (Inoue *et al.*, 2017; Stokburger-Sauer *et al.*, 2012). It has been linked to consistent  
140 attendance, positive word-of-mouth, and fan engagement even during negative events (Bauer  
141 *et al.*, 2008). Studies confirm its role in shaping fans' behavioral tendencies toward athlete-  
142 endorsed brands (Mahmoudian *et al.*, 2021).

143 Behavioral intentions refer to fans' willingness to consider, purchase, or recommend brands  
144 endorsed by football players. Rather than measuring actual behavior, this construct aligns with  
145 the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991), emphasizing the role of emotional closeness in  
146 influencing consumer decisions. Attachment theory suggests that emotional bonds enhance  
147 source credibility and brand persuasion (Park *et al.*, 2014; Thomson, 2006).

148 Based on these insights, this study focuses on two key outcomes—FPA and EBBI—as  
149 central mechanisms linking football players' brand image to fans' emotional attachment and  
150 intentional behavior toward endorsed brands.

### 151 ***Football Player Brand Image as an Antecedent of Fan Outcomes***

152 Brand image refers to the set of perceptions and associations consumers hold in memory  
153 about a brand (Keller, 1993). In the context of football, FPBI encompasses how fans perceive  
154 a football player's performance, appearance, behavior, and symbolic traits (Arai *et al.*, 2014;  
155 Parmentier *et al.*, 2013). Arai *et al.* (2013, 2014) proposed a multidimensional model of ABI,  
156 comprising athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle, rooted in  
157 brand equity theory (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993).

158 Recent studies recommend refining this model for professional football, distinguishing on-  
159 field and off-field dimensions (Kunkel *et al.*, 2019; Väätäinen & Dickenson, 2019). This

160 distinction helps clarify how specific brand facets influence fans' emotional attachment and  
161 behavioral intentions (Mahmoudian *et al.*, 2021).

### 162 *On-Field Brand Image Dimensions and Football Player Attachment*

163 On-field FPBI dimensions include performance-related traits like *football player expertise*,  
164 *competition style*, *sportsmanship*, *rivalry*, and *team-oriented behavior* (Arai *et al.*, 2013;  
165 Zarkada & Tzoumaka, 2020). These traits shape public perceptions and influence fan  
166 identification and emotional bonds.

167 In the present study, the dimension *football player expertise*—referred to in previous  
168 research as athletic expertise (Arai *et al.*, 2013, 2014)—captures technical skill and consistency,  
169 which have been consistently linked to admiration and fan commitment (Lu *et al.*, 2024;  
170 Mahmoudian *et al.*, 2021). *Competition style*, characterized by aesthetic or charismatic play,  
171 can trigger emotional reactions and foster attachment, particularly among younger fans (Shibin  
172 & Azees, 2024). *Sportsmanship*, encompassing fairness and respect, contributes to perceptions  
173 of authenticity, though some studies report mixed effects, including negative associations with  
174 fan commitment (Kucharska *et al.*, 2020; Väätäinen & Dickenson, 2018). *Rivalry* enhances  
175 emotional salience through iconic confrontations, though its impact may vary by context (Lu *et*  
176 *al.*, 2024). *Team-oriented behavior*, including leadership and loyalty, is emerging as a key  
177 driver of fan identification, though further quantitative validation is needed (Zarkada &  
178 Tzoumaka, 2020). Together, these dimensions shape public perceptions and influence fan  
179 bonding.

180 Recent empirical studies provide mixed but valuable evidence on the role of on-field brand  
181 image dimensions in shaping *football player attachment*. Mahmoudian *et al.* (2021) found that  
182 athletic performance—encompassing *athletic expertise*, *competition style*, *sportsmanship*, and  
183 *rivalry*—positively influenced fan loyalty. Lu *et al.* (2024) similarly confirmed that *athletic*

184 *expertise* and *ethical behavior* enhance identification and attitudes, while Shibin and Azees  
185 (2024) emphasized the emotional impact of expressive play styles, particularly among younger  
186 fans. In contrast, Väättäinen and Dickenson (2018) reported diverging results: *athletic expertise*  
187 showed a strong positive effect, *competition style* was only marginally significant, *rivalry* had  
188 no significant impact, and notably, *sportsmanship* had a negative effect on psychological  
189 attachment. These inconsistencies highlight the need for a disaggregated analysis of on-field  
190 dimensions.

191 Despite this variability, foundational models (Arai *et al.*, 2013; Pashaie *et al.*, 2022)  
192 emphasize the symbolic and emotional relevance of athletic conduct in shaping fan attachment.  
193 Moreover, as Mahmoudian *et al.* (2021) argue, performance-related cues remain central to fan  
194 engagement. Based on this rationale, we propose the following hypotheses:

195 Hypotheses 1.a–1.e: *Football player expertise* (H1.a), *competition style* (H1.b),  
196 *sportsmanship* (H1.c), *rivalry* (H1.d), and *team-oriented behavior* (H1.e) have a positive  
197 influence on *football player attachment*.

#### 198 *Off-Field Brand Image Dimensions and Football Player Attachment*

199 The off-field dimensions of FPBI include symbolic, aesthetic, and narrative features that  
200 shape the athlete's identity beyond sport. These are commonly grouped into two categories:  
201 attractive appearance—*physical attractiveness*, *symbol*, and *body fit*—and marketable  
202 lifestyle—*life story*, *role model*, and *relationship effort* (Arai *et al.*, 2014). Appearance-based  
203 attributes operate mainly at a visual and symbolic level, while lifestyle traits offer deeper  
204 emotional narratives that strengthen long-term attachment.

205 Within attractive appearance, *physical attractiveness* enhances emotional appeal and  
206 perceived credibility, especially when viewed as authentic (Biz & Schubert, 2024; Lu *et al.*,

207 2024). *Symbol*, encompassing fashion or visual style, contributes to personal brand  
208 distinctiveness and identification, particularly among younger audiences (Bredikhina *et al.*,  
209 2022; Shibin & Azees, 2024). *Body fit* signals professionalism and discipline; traits often  
210 admired by fans (Arai *et al.*, 2013).

211 Although findings are mixed, previous research grounded in the ABI framework  
212 consistently identifies *attractive appearance* as a key component. Mahmoudian *et al.* (2021)  
213 found a significant positive influence of attractive appearance on fan loyalty, while Shibin and  
214 Azees (2024) noted that *physical attractiveness* and *symbol* did not predict attachment among  
215 young fans, which are likely reflecting demographic sensitivities. Nevertheless, visual  
216 dimensions remain key drivers of emotional resonance and brand visibility (Arai *et al.*, 2014).  
217 Accordingly, we hypothesize:

218 Hypotheses 2.a–2.c: *Physical attractiveness* (H2.a), *symbol* (H2.b), and *body fit* (H2.c)  
219 have a positive influence on *football player attachment*.

220 Beyond physical and stylistic features, athletes also cultivate fans' emotional attachment  
221 through the dimensions that constitute the marketable lifestyle category. *Life story*, including  
222 adversity, transformation, or personal milestones, injects emotional depth and enables symbolic  
223 identification with athletes. Narratives of vulnerability and growth enhance authenticity and  
224 strengthen brand meaning (Braunstein & Zhang, 2005; Shibin & Azees, 2024).

225 Closely related, *role model*, expressed through ethical conduct, social responsibility, and  
226 leadership, nurtures trust and moral alignment. Athletes perceived as role models evolve into  
227 aspirational figures fostering loyalty and emotional attachment (Biz & Schubert, 2024;  
228 Kucharska *et al.*, 2020).

229        *Relationship effort* refers to public engagement, approachability, and digital interaction  
230 practices that humanize athletes and create perceived closeness. Proactive and respectful  
231 communication fosters intimacy and emotional connection (Shibin & Azees, 2024).

232        Empirical evidence generally supports the positive influence of these dimensions, although  
233 some variability exists. Shibin and Azees (2024) found that *life story* and *relationship effort*  
234 significantly predict psychological attachment, particularly among younger fans. Similarly, *role*  
235 *model* has been consistently linked to trust and aspirational identification (Kucharska *et al.*,  
236 2020). Väättäinen and Dickenson (2018) further confirmed the positive impact of *life story* and  
237 *role model* on psychological attachment, but found that relationship effort was not statistically  
238 significant, suggesting that its effect may depend on contextual moderators such as fan segment  
239 or media exposure.

240        Anchored in the ABI framework (Arai *et al.*, 2013, 2014) and acknowledging the symbolic  
241 and emotional significance of lifestyle dimensions, we propose positive relationships between  
242 each and *football player attachment*.

243        Hypotheses 3.a–3.c: *Life story* (H3.a), *role model* (H3.b), and *relationship effort* (H3.c)  
244 have a positive influence on *football player attachment*.

### 245 ***Fans' Emotional Attachment and Brand-Related Intentions***

246        The link between emotional attachment and consumer behavior is well established in  
247 marketing literature (Bansal *et al.*, 2004; Mattila, 2006). In sports, fans' attachment to athletes  
248 has been linked to loyalty, resistance to negative information, and responsiveness to  
249 endorsements (Park *et al.*, 2014; Rai *et al.*, 2021). Emotional bonds can enhance source  
250 credibility and the persuasive impact of brand associations, especially when endorsements align  
251 with the player's image (Ohanian, 1991).

252 The relationship between emotional attachment and endorsement-related behavioral  
253 intentions (EBBI) is further supported by literature on sport sponsorship and brand advocacy.  
254 Emotional attachment fosters stronger identification with the endorser, enhancing the  
255 credibility and effectiveness of brand associations (Thomson et al., 2005). This emotional bond  
256 encourages fans to internalize the symbolic meaning of the athlete–brand connection, making  
257 the endorsed brand more personally relevant and desirable (Carlson & Donovan, 2013). While  
258 some scholars argue that fans may support endorsed brands for instrumental reasons such as  
259 perceived product quality or popularity (Koernig & Boyd, 2009), there is growing consensus  
260 that affective mechanisms play a pivotal role in endorsement effectiveness—particularly in  
261 emotionally charged domains like sport (Biscaia et al., 2013). Based on this, we hypothesize:

262 Hypothesis 4: *Football player attachment* has a positive influence on *endorsed brand*  
263 *behavioral intentions*.

264 Based on the literature reviewed, we propose the conceptual model linking brand image  
265 dimensions, fans’ emotional attachment, and endorsed brand behavioral intentions (see Figure  
266 1).

267 Figure 1. Proposed conceptual framework for football player brand.

268 ---- Insert Figure 1 ----

## 269 **Method**

### 270 *Instrument Development*

271 All constructs—that is, the specific dimensions that define a football player’s brand  
272 image—and items—the specific indicators used to assess each—were grounded in prior  
273 literature and tailored to the context of Spanish football fans. Following the adaptation of the

274 ABI framework to the football context, all items were reworded to reflect terminology,  
275 behaviors, and situations that are familiar and meaningful to football fans, enhancing content  
276 validity and ecological fit. This linguistic and cultural adaptation of items ensured that the  
277 operationalization of the constructs remained faithful to the conceptual model while aligning  
278 with the lived experience and interpretative frameworks of the target audience.

279 FPBI, as adapted from the broader ABI framework, was measured through 11 dimensions  
280 (37 items): five on-field dimensions—*football player expertise, competition style,*  
281 *sportsmanship, rivalry, and team-oriented behavior* (Arai *et al.*, 2013, 2014; ESIC, 2014;  
282 Kilduff *et al.*, 2010; Netemeyer & Bearden, 1992; Ross *et al.*, 2006; Zarkada & Tzoumaka,  
283 2020)—and six off-field dimensions, which shape two distinct categories: attractive  
284 appearance (*physical attractiveness, symbol, and body fit*) and marketable lifestyle (*life story,*  
285 *role model, and relationship effort*) (Arai *et al.*, 2013, 2014; Braunstein & Zhang, 2005;  
286 Cadogan *et al.*, 2009; ESIC, 2014).

287 *Football player attachment* (FPA) was measured with 3 items from Stokburger-Sauer *et*  
288 *al.* (2012) and *endorsed brand behavioral intentions* (EBBI) with 3 items from Liu *et al.* (2020)  
289 and Ohanian (1991).

290 Overall, the model included 13 constructs and 43 items (Table 1), using 5-point Likert  
291 scales (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

292 Table 1. Conceptual constructs and corresponding measurement items in the football player  
293 brand model.

294 ---- Insert Table 1 ----

295 ***Sample Characteristics***

296 The survey was distributed to 800 Spanish members of Generation Z, resulting in 638 valid  
297 responses after excluding incomplete questionnaires and screening for formal and content  
298 consistency. Data were collected over a four-week period in March 2025 using the premium  
299 version of the professional survey platform EncuestaFacil.com. A non-probabilistic sampling  
300 method was employed, based on the controlled distribution of the questionnaire via a university  
301 mailing list targeting undergraduate and postgraduate students in business, marketing and  
302 communication programs. This approach ensured access to a relevant and information-rich  
303 sample, consistent with established practices in athlete brand image research involving young  
304 adult fans (Mahmoudian et al., 2021; Väätäinen & Dickenson, 2018). Only respondents who  
305 self-identified as football fans were allowed to complete the questionnaire, which was  
306 anonymous and self-administered.

307 The final sample averaged 23.5 years old, with 73.4% male and 26.6% female.

308 Generation Z was purposefully selected due to its strategic importance in the contemporary  
309 sports marketing ecosystem. As the most digitally connected and media-savvy consumer group,  
310 Gen Z exhibits high emotional engagement with athletes, responsiveness to personal narratives,  
311 and strong brand advocacy behaviors—making them especially relevant for studying  
312 attachment and brand endorsement outcomes (Kucharska, 2020; Pashaie et al., 2022). This  
313 demographic alignment reinforces the coherence between the study’s objectives, constructs,  
314 and target population.

315

### 316 *Ethics and Informed Consent*

317 The study did not require formal IRB approval, as no institutional review board currently  
318 exists at the authors’ institution. However, the research protocol was reviewed and approved  
319 internally by the academic coordination body responsible for ethical oversight in the Social

320 Sciences faculty. The study adhered to the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. All  
321 participants were informed about the objectives of the study, the voluntary nature of their  
322 participation, and the confidentiality of their responses. Informed consent was obtained from  
323 all respondents prior to data collection through a required agreement checkbox on the first page  
324 of the questionnaire.

### 325 ***Football Player Selection Method***

326 To ensure consistency in stimulus exposure, the study used a predefined list of 15 top  
327 professional football players. Participants were asked to respond based on the player they felt  
328 most identified with, a method aligned with prior athlete brand image research (Arai *et al.*,  
329 2013; Väätäinen & Dickenson, 2018).

330 Players were selected based on five criteria: affiliation with top-ranked UEFA clubs,  
331 outstanding performance in the 2024 Ballon d'Or awards, representation across leading  
332 European leagues, prominence within their clubs, and significant media or commercial  
333 visibility. These criteria captured the three main dimensions of ABI—athletic performance,  
334 attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle (Arai *et al.*, 2013; Kucharska, 2020;  
335 Mahmoudian *et al.*, 2021).

336 The final list included 12 male and 3 female players, ensuring broad public familiarity and  
337 minimizing familiarity bias (Pashaie *et al.*, 2022). Selection rates were as follows: Jude  
338 Bellingham (37.0%), Antoine Griezmann (19.1%), Vinícius Júnior (8.8%), Lamine Yamal  
339 (8.5%), Kylian Mbappé (8.2%), Nico Williams (4.4%), Robert Lewandowski (2.8%), Rodri  
340 Hernández (2.8%), Alexia Putellas (2.8%), Caroline Graham (1.9%), Aitana Bonmatí (1.3%),  
341 Raphinha (1.3%), Harry Kane (0.6%), Salma Paralluelo (0.6%), and Erling Haaland (0.3%).

### 342 ***Common Method Variance***

343 Given that all data were collected from the same source at a single time point, we assessed  
344 potential common method variance (CMV) using the single-factor approach (Podsakoff *et al.*,  
345 2003). A confirmatory factor analysis with a common latent factor was conducted. The average  
346 difference in standardized loadings was .061 (range = .000 to .152), well below the 0.20  
347 threshold (Yang *et al.*, 2017), indicating that CMV was not a significant concern.

### 348 ***Data Analysis***

349 We employed a three-step analytical strategy: confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) for  
350 construct validity, structural equation modeling (SEM) for hypothesis testing, and fuzzy-set  
351 qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) to identify alternative pathways to strong football  
352 player attachment (FPA).

353 CFA and SEM were conducted using IBM SPSS AMOS 28, and fsQCA with fsQCA 2.0.  
354 This combination provided a comprehensive view: SEM validated net effects, while fsQCA  
355 identified patterns linking brand image dimensions to fans' emotional attachment.

### 356 **Results**

357 Before CFA, a descriptive analysis was conducted (Table 2). Mean scores ranged from  
358 2.35 (*life story*) to 4.50 (*body fit*), indicating generally favorable perceptions except for *life*  
359 *story*. Standard deviations indicated moderate variability. Despite negative skewness in *football*  
360 *player expertise* and *competition style*, the data were deemed suitable for CFA given the  
361 robustness of maximum likelihood estimation under moderate non-normality (West *et al.*,  
362 1995).

363 Table 2. Summary of descriptive statistics, and HTMT analysis for initial CFA.

364 ---- Insert Table 2 ----

365 ***Step One: Measurement Model Testing (CFA)***

366 An initial CFA assessed the measurement model with 13 latent constructs and 43 observed  
367 variables (items). The model showed marginally acceptable fit indices ( $\chi^2/df = 3.94$ , RMSEA  
368 = 0.068, CFI = 0.867, TLI = 0.846, SRMR = 0.070). Although all regression weights were  
369 significant ( $p < 0.001$ ), several psychometric issues emerged. Some items had loadings below  
370 0.70 (and a few under 0.60; Hair *et al.*, 2010). Certain constructs also had AVE values below  
371 the 0.50 threshold, and *rivalry* (RI) showed low reliability (CR = 0.622) and validity (AVE =  
372 0.352; Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; see Table 3). Problems of discriminant validity appeared, especially  
373 between *football player expertise* (FPE) and *competition style* (CS), and between *role model*  
374 (RM) and *relationship effort* (RE), where HTMT ratios exceeded 0.85 (Henseler *et al.*, 2015;  
375 see Table 2).

376 Table 3. Comparison of standardized factor loadings, CRs and AVEs of initial and final  
377 constructs.

378 ----- Insert Table 3 -----

379 To address these issues, the model was refined by removing items with loadings below  
380 0.60. Items between 0.60 and 0.70 were retained if their constructs showed sufficient  
381 convergent validity (AVE > 0.50). RI was eliminated due to poor reliability and validity.  
382 Although the rivalry dimension has been emphasized in prior literature for its potential  
383 relevance to specific fan profiles, it did not exhibit sufficient psychometric validity or reliability  
384 in our data. Therefore, it was excluded from the final model in line with best practices for  
385 construct refinement in SEM studies.

386 Additionally, FPE and CS were merged into *player performance & style* (PPS), RM and  
387 RE into *ethical & relational conduct* (ERC). This decision was informed not only by empirical

388 indications (e.g., high HTMT ratios) but also by theoretical considerations. FPE and CS both  
389 capture on-field performance expressions—technical consistency and stylistic charisma—  
390 which often coalesce in fans' perceptions of athletic excellence (Arai et al., 2013; Väättäinen &  
391 Dickenson, 2019). Similarly, RM and RE reflect overlapping aspects of athletes' moral and  
392 relational identity: RM denotes ethical leadership and role modeling, while RE highlights public  
393 engagement and approachability. Previous research indicates these are closely tied in fans'  
394 mental representations of athlete trustworthiness and authenticity (Braunstein & Zhang, 2005;  
395 Kucharska et al., 2020). Therefore, the new constructs not only enhance statistical robustness  
396 but also preserve conceptual integrity. Such model refinement is in line with established  
397 practices in SEM to ensure parsimony, validity, and theoretical coherence (Hair et al., 2010).

398 The revised CFA model, with 10 constructs and 30 items, showed improved fit ( $\chi^2/df =$   
399 2.84, RMSEA = 0.067, CFI = 0.907, TLI = 0.892, SRMR = 0.051). All loadings exceeded 0.60,  
400 and all constructs demonstrated good reliability (CR > 0.70) and convergent validity (AVE >  
401 0.50; Table 3). Discriminant validity was also confirmed, with all HTMT values falling below  
402 the 0.85 threshold (see Table 4).

403 Table 4. HTMT analysis for final constructs.

404 ----- Insert Table 4 -----

405 These results support the robustness and adequacy of the final measurement model for  
406 subsequent structural analyses.

#### 407 ***Step Two: Structural Model Testing (SEM)***

408 After refining the measurement model, a structural model was estimated to assess the  
409 hypothesized relationships among constructs. The final model included 10 latent constructs and

410 30 observed variables, capturing links between brand image dimensions, *football player*  
411 *attachment*, and *endorsed brand behavioral intentions*.

412 As in the measurement refinement, FPE and CS were merged into PPS, and RM and RE  
413 into ERC. Hypotheses were updated accordingly (H1.ab and H3.bc), and the hypothesis for RI  
414 (H1.d) was removed. These changes are reflected in Figure 2.

415 Figure 2. Final structural model for football player brand.

416 ----- Insert Figure 2 -----

417 The structural model demonstrated acceptable fit indices ( $\chi^2/df = 2.85$ , RMSEA = 0.067,  
418 CFI = 0.905, TLI = 0.892, SRMR = 0.060), indicating that the model provided an adequate  
419 representation of the data. Table 5 presents the structural estimates, including unstandardized  
420 regression coefficients ( $\beta$ ) and significance levels.

421 Table 5. Final structural model estimates.

422 ----- Insert Table 5 -----

423 SEM results showed that among on-field dimensions, PPS had a significant positive effect  
424 on FPA ( $\beta = 0.335$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), supporting H1.ab. *Team-oriented behavior* (TOB) also had a  
425 significant positive effect ( $\beta = 0.362$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), supporting H1.e. Conversely, sportsmanship  
426 (SP) negatively impacted FPA ( $\beta = -0.187$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), supporting H1.c but in the opposite  
427 direction.

428 For off-field dimensions, *life story* (LS) ( $\beta = 0.123$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and ERC ( $\beta = 0.280$ ,  $p <$   
429  $0.05$ ) positively influenced FPA, supporting H3.a and H3.bc. Conversely, *physical*  
430 *attractiveness* (PA) ( $\beta = -0.202$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and *body fit* (BF) ( $\beta = -0.181$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) had

431 significant negative effects, supporting H2.a and H2.c but contrary to expectations. *Symbol*  
432 (SY) was not significant ( $\beta = 0.194$ ,  $p = 0.072$ ), and H2.b was not supported.

433 Finally, FPA demonstrated a strong and significant positive relationship with EBBI ( $\beta =$   
434  $0.566$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), supporting H4.

435 Overall, these findings underscore the asymmetric influence of brand image dimensions on  
436 FPA. Some dimensions (e.g., PPS, TOB, LS, ERC) foster strong emotional bonds, while others  
437 (e.g., SP, PA, BF) may weaken attachment or have neutral effects (e.g., SY). To further explore  
438 these complex relationships and uncover potential configurational patterns, the following  
439 section applies fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA).

#### 440 ***Step Three: Configurational Model Testing (fsQCA)***

441 To complement the SEM findings, a fsQCA was conducted to uncover alternative causal  
442 pathways leading to FPA.

443 The fsQCA model focused exclusively on dimensions with significant effects in SEM,  
444 excluding SY due to its non-significant contribution. To enhance theoretical coherence and  
445 parsimony, we consolidated conceptually related constructs into three higher-order conditions:  
446 SP and TOB were integrated into *ethical team player* (ETP); PA and BF merged into *aesthetic*  
447 *appeal* (AA); and LS and ERC formed *relational & life narrative* (RLN).

448 This aggregation approach followed a structured logic inspired by Arai et al. (2014), who  
449 proposed three second-order dimensions of athlete brand image: Athletic Performance,  
450 Attractive Appearance, and Marketable Lifestyle. Accordingly, ETP mirrors the athlete's on-  
451 field conduct and competitive ethos (akin to Athletic Performance), AA reflects the visual and  
452 symbolic dimension (Attractive Appearance), and RLN encapsulates narrative authenticity,  
453 emotional resonance, and ethical alignment (conceptually parallel to Marketable Lifestyle).

454 This structure enabled a more interpretable and theoretically grounded configurational  
455 model while preserving the symbolic richness of athlete brand image as a multidimensional  
456 construct.

457 Consequently, the final model included four causal conditions—PPS, ETP, AA, and  
458 RLN—analyzed against FPA as the outcome variable. This structure enabled a manageable and  
459 theoretically grounded configurational analysis.

460 Figure 3. Configurational model used in the fsQCA analysis.

461 ----- Insert Figure 3 -----

#### 462 *Calibration*

463 All variables were calibrated into fuzzy sets to fit fsQCA requirements. Each dimension  
464 was operationalized by averaging the final items retained after CFA and SEM, ensuring  
465 consistency across methods.

466 Given the non-normal distribution of the variables (Kolmogorov–Smirnov tests; see Table  
467 6), calibration followed Ragin’s (2009) direct method. Full membership (0.95), crossover  
468 (0.50), and full non-membership (0.05) thresholds were set based on the 80th, 50th, and 20th  
469 percentiles, respectively, as recommended by Pappas and Woodside (2021).

470 To avoid computational issues, a small constant (0.001) was added to full membership  
471 scores below 1. Cases at the crossover point (0.50) were excluded due to their indeterminate set  
472 membership (Fiss, 2011).

473 This calibration process allowed the subsequent analysis of necessary and sufficient  
474 conditions for high FPA.

475 Table 6. Kolmogorov-Smirnov hypothesis test summary and percentile metrics.

476 --- Insert Table 6 ---

477 *Analysis of Necessary Conditions*

478 Following calibration, the fsQCA assessed whether any individual dimension was  
479 necessary for achieving high FPA. As shown in Table 7, none of the conditions met the  
480 recommended thresholds for consistency ( $\geq 0.90$ ) or coverage ( $\geq 0.50$ ) (Schneider &  
481 Wagemann, 2012). This indicates that FPA does not depend on any single dimension but instead  
482 emerges from specific combinations of conditions.

483 Table 7. Analysis of necessary conditions.

484 --- Insert Table 7 ---

485 *Analysis of Sufficient Conditions*

486 After confirming the absence of necessary conditions, the analysis proceeded to identify  
487 sufficient configurations for high levels of FPA. A truth table comprising all 16 possible  
488 combinations of the four causal conditions ( $2^4$ ) was constructed. To ensure analytical rigor  
489 and parsimony, a minimum frequency threshold of 18 cases and a consistency cut-off of 0.90  
490 were applied, following best practices for large-N fsQCA studies (sample size  $N = 638$ ; Ragin,  
491 2008; Fiss, 2011; Schneider & Wagemann, 2012).

492 Table 8. Sufficient configurations of conditions for FPA.

493 ---- Insert Table 8 ----

494 Two configurations emerged as sufficient for achieving high levels of FPA, with a solution  
495 consistency of 0.864 and a solution coverage of 0.663, indicating a robust and theoretically  
496 meaningful model.

497 The first configuration, PPS \* ~AA \* RLN (raw coverage = 0.575; consistency = 0.898),  
498 highlights that strong *player performance and style* (PPS) combined with a strong *relational*  
499 *and life narrative* (RLN) can foster high FPA even when *aesthetic appeal* (AA) is low or absent.  
500 This pathway suggests that fans are drawn to technically skilled players who project emotional  
501 depth and authenticity, regardless of their physical appearance or visual appeal.

502 The second configuration, ~PPS \* ETP \* RLN (raw coverage = 0.558; consistency =  
503 0.884), shows that FPA can also emerge when athletic performance is less prominent (~PPS),  
504 if players exhibit strong *ethical team player behavior* (ETP) and emotionally engaging  
505 narratives (RLN). Here, relational integrity and moral alignment substitute for technical  
506 excellence, enabling players to build strong affective bonds through prosocial conduct and  
507 personal storytelling.

508 These findings illustrate the principle of equifinality: emotional attachment to football  
509 players can be driven either by a combination of performance excellence and emotional  
510 resonance, or by ethical leadership and relational authenticity. In both cases, the consistent  
511 presence of RLN across pathways underlines the pivotal role of narrative and emotional  
512 connection in fostering FPA.

### 513 **Discussion**

514 This study explored how football players' brand image dimensions influence fans' emotional  
515 attachment and behavioral intentions toward endorsed brands. Integrating SEM and fsQCA, we

516 provide both variable-centered and configurational perspectives, revealing expected effects and  
517 counterintuitive patterns, particularly concerning attractive appearance.

518 *Athletic Performance and Marketable Lifestyle as Core Drivers of Fans' Emotional*  
519 *Attachment*

520 SEM results underscore the importance of on-field performance. The *player performance*  
521 *& style dimension*, combining technical expertise and stylistic flair, had a strong positive effect,  
522 confirming studies linking athletic skill to fan admiration and psychological commitment (Arai  
523 *et al.*, 2013; Braunstein & Zhang, 2005; Lu *et al.*, 2024; Mahmoudian *et al.*, 2021). This aligns  
524 with Väätäinen and Dickenson (2018), who identified both expertise and style as key drivers of  
525 fans' emotional attachment.

526 *Team-oriented behavior* also emerged as a significant predictor, suggesting that fans value  
527 visible commitment to collective goals alongside individual brilliance. This supports evidence  
528 emphasizing prosocial attributes like leadership, cooperation, and loyalty in strengthening  
529 athlete-fan identification (Carlson & Donavan, 2013; Zarkada & Tzoumaka, 2020).

530 Unexpectedly, *sportsmanship* negatively impacted fans' emotional attachment, aligning  
531 with Väätäinen and Dickenson's (2018) findings. In elite contexts, fans may perceive fairness  
532 as lacking competitive drive, reducing emotional engagement.

533 Off-field, *relational & life narrative*—encompassing storytelling, emotional resonance, and  
534 integrity—emerged as one of the strongest predictors of fans' emotional attachment. This  
535 finding underscores the shift in brand relationships from transactional exchanges to affective  
536 and symbolic connections, where perceived authenticity plays a central role (Thomson, 2006;  
537 Park *et al.*, 2014). Fans increasingly attach to athletes not merely for their achievements but for  
538 the narratives they embody—narratives that reflect resilience, empathy, and moral coherence.

539 This resonates with emerging perspectives in branding that highlight the power of personal  
540 storytelling as a strategic vehicle for building trust and emotional engagement (Mogaji, 2021;  
541 Braunstein & Zhang, 2005). It also aligns with research on celebrity authenticity and moral  
542 identification (Kucharska et al., 2020), as well as athlete-focused studies emphasizing the  
543 symbolic role of *life story* and *role model* behavior in fostering deep fan–player bonds  
544 (Mahmoudian et al., 2021; Väättäinen & Dickenson, 2018).

### 545 ***The Aesthetic Paradox: When Appearance Backfires***

546 A surprising finding concerns attractive appearance—*physical attractiveness*, *body fit*, and  
547 *symbol*. Contrary to assumptions, both *physical attractiveness* and *body fit* negatively impacted  
548 fans’ emotional attachment, while *symbol* was not significant. These results challenge earlier  
549 frameworks (Arai et al., 2013) and align with recent studies questioning the relational value of  
550 visual traits (Shibin & Azees, 2024; Väättäinen & Dickenson, 2018).

551 This paradox may reflect growing skepticism toward aesthetic traits perceived as  
552 commercially constructed or lacking narrative authenticity (Shibin & Azees, 2024; Väättäinen  
553 & Dickenson, 2019). While appearance can enhance visibility, it may not generate emotional  
554 resonance unless embedded in a meaningful personal story. This interpretation aligns with  
555 emerging views in branding that highlight authenticity and coherence over idealized imagery  
556 (Mogaji, 2021; Park et al., 2014).

557 FsQCA results reinforce this view: appearance-related traits did not feature in any sufficient  
558 configuration for strong fans’ emotional attachment. In fact, the absence of *aesthetic appeal*  
559 was part of one high-attachment pathway. This suggests that fans bond through technical  
560 excellence, ethical behavior, or relational narratives, not visual allure alone.

561 .

562 While gender may shape how fans interpret appearance-related traits—especially when  
563 these are perceived as commercially constructed rather than authentic (Shibin & Azees,  
564 2024)—our study did not test moderation effects. Given the predominantly male composition  
565 of the sample, we refrain from definitive claims and instead propose this as a relevant avenue  
566 for future research.

### 567 *Configurational Insights: Multiple Pathways to Fans' Emotional Attachment*

568 The fsQCA revealed two configurations that lead to high fans' emotional attachment,  
569 illustrating the principle of equifinality. Rather than relying on a single driver, different  
570 combinations of brand image dimensions can foster strong emotional bonds.

571 The fsQCA results demonstrate that fans' emotional attachment may be triggered by distinct  
572 yet convergent mechanisms, echoing the notion of multiple relational routes in brand  
573 relationships (Park et al., 2014). One route emphasizes admiration for athletic excellence  
574 combined with emotionally resonant narratives, resembling the archetype of a high-performing,  
575 relatable professional. This pattern aligns with Väättäinen and Dickenson (2018), who found  
576 that combinations of expertise and life story foster strong fan commitment. The other pathway  
577 centers on ethical alignment and symbolic identification, indicating that fans may attach to  
578 players who display integrity and emotional closeness—even in the absence of outstanding  
579 performance. This configuration reflects what Kucharska et al. (2020) describe as the power of  
580 authentic personal brands to drive fan loyalty independently of athletic dominance. Together,  
581 these alternative paths suggest that fans are moved either by competence or by coherence with  
582 their own values.

583

584       What stands out across both pathways is the consistent presence of *relational & life*  
585 *narrative*, reaffirming its pivotal role in emotional bonding. This finding supports previous  
586 studies highlighting the power of storytelling and symbolic alignment in shaping brand  
587 relationships (Braunstein & Zhang, 2005; Mogaji, 2021; Väätäinen & Dickenson, 2018). By  
588 acting as a bridge between otherwise distinct athlete profiles, this dimension anchors attachment  
589 in emotionally meaningful narratives rather than mere performance or aesthetics.

590       Overall, these findings suggest that brand managers and athletes can pursue differentiated  
591 yet equally effective strategies: one rooted in performance excellence and emotional  
592 storytelling, the other emphasizing ethical coherence and symbolic resonance. In both cases,  
593 authenticity remains the cornerstone—ensuring that brand identity aligns with fans’ values and  
594 aspirations.

## 595 **Theoretical Implications**

596       This study advances the theoretical understanding of football players’ brand image by  
597 integrating insights from brand equity theory (Keller, 1993), construct measurement (Edwards,  
598 2001), and the dimension-level approach (Väätäinen & Dickenson, 2019). A dimension-  
599 specific perspective clarifies how on- and off-field dimensions shape fans’ emotional  
600 attachment and behavioral intentions, providing a more nuanced account of athlete brand  
601 influence.

602       First, the study moves beyond traditional higher-order models that aggregate diverse  
603 dimensions (e.g., Arai *et al.*, 2014), providing a disaggregated view that isolates the effects of  
604 individual components. This reveals not only which dimensions enhance emotional attachment  
605 but also which may produce negative effects—such as *sportsmanship*, *physical appearance* or  
606 *body fit*. Such construct-level analysis enhances theoretical clarity and addresses recent calls

607 for finer-grained approaches in sport marketing (Kunkel *et al.*, 2019; Väätäinen & Dickenson,  
608 2019).

609 Second, it introduces *team-oriented behavior* (TOB) as a novel construct in athlete  
610 branding. While prior research emphasized individual traits like expertise or charisma (Arai *et*  
611 *al.*, 2013), TOB captures collective values such as selflessness, leadership, and loyalty—  
612 attributes central to team sports but underexplored in individual branding. Our findings  
613 establish TOB as a consistent predictor of fans’ emotional attachment, deepening the relational  
614 understanding of athlete-fan dynamics.

615 Third, the integration of SEM and fsQCA offers a methodological contribution. SEM  
616 uncovers net effects, while fsQCA identifies alternative attribute combinations leading to high  
617 emotional attachment, illustrating configurational equifinality. To our knowledge, this is the  
618 first application of fsQCA to football player branding, offering a replicable framework for  
619 future studies (Fiss, 2011; Greckhamer *et al.*, 2008).

620 Fourth, we propose and validate the *relational & life narrative* (RLN) construct, which  
621 integrates storytelling, moral alignment, and emotional resonance. RLN consistently appears  
622 across all sufficient configurations, suggesting its role as a quasi-core condition in the emotional  
623 architecture of athlete-fan relationships. Unlike other brand image dimensions that vary across  
624 causal paths, RLN acts as a foundational symbolic anchor. This supports the growing consensus  
625 in branding and sports marketing literature that emotionally resonant storytelling and perceived  
626 authenticity are critical antecedents of deep fan–player attachment (Thomson, 2006; Mogaji,  
627 2021). The creation of RLN also reflects an effort to capture this symbolic layer more  
628 holistically—by combining ethically grounded behavior and life storytelling into a single  
629 conceptual frame tailored for configurational analysis. This extends earlier conceptualizations  
630 that treated such dimensions separately (Arai *et al.*, 2013, 2014) or addressed them indirectly

631 through authenticity and identification processes (Kucharska *et al.*, 2020), positioning RLN as  
632 a central axis in athlete brand construction.

633 Fifth, the study offers a critical re-evaluation of aesthetic dimensions. Contrary to prevailing  
634 assumptions, *physical attractiveness*, *body fit*, and *symbol* do not foster—and may even  
635 undermine—fans’ emotional attachment when disconnected from authentic narratives. This  
636 challenges the visual-centric focus of earlier models (Arai *et al.*, 2014) and supports recent  
637 critiques of superficial branding (Shibin & Azees, 2024).

638 Finally, by applying the model to elite European football and Spanish fans, the study  
639 broadens a literature traditionally centered on U.S. contexts or team-level analyses, enhancing  
640 the contextual validity of athlete brand research in a globalized fandom landscape (Kunkel *et*  
641 *al.*, 2019).

642 In sum, this research refines and extends athlete branding theory by demonstrating how  
643 distinct brand image dimensions—and their configurations—shape key fan outcomes. Through  
644 conceptual, empirical, and methodological contributions, it offers a robust foundation for future  
645 work on how athletes build emotional and symbolic connections with fans.

## 646 **Managerial Implications**

647 This study provides practical guidance for footballers, clubs, and sponsor brands aiming to  
648 build stronger emotional bonds with fans and enhance brand engagement.

649 For footballers, the findings question the emphasis on visual appeal. While *physical*  
650 *attractiveness* and *body fit* are commercially valued, they may have limited impact on fans’  
651 emotional attachment unless tied to authentic narratives (Shibin & Azees, 2024; Väättäinen &  
652 Dickenson, 2019). Instead, *relational & life narrative* dimensions—storytelling, role model  
653 behavior, and emotional depth—consistently drive fans’ emotional attachment. Athletes are

654 encouraged to convey resilience, integrity, and empathy to enhance symbolic and emotional  
655 impact. These insights also point to the value of structured training programs that help athletes  
656 cultivate leadership, teamwork, and prosocial behaviors, reinforcing their relational capital and  
657 long-term brand value.

658 For clubs, the findings emphasize relational and moral dimensions as strategic branding  
659 assets. Beyond promoting performance, clubs should highlight prosocial behaviors like team-  
660 oriented conduct and ethical engagement, which boost fans' emotional attachment. Pashaie *et*  
661 *al.* (2022) also stress the role of collective values in aligning players, clubs, and fans. By  
662 showcasing these traits through media or community initiatives, clubs can build authentic brand  
663 identities. Moreover, the findings suggest that clubs should strategically manage players whose  
664 athletic performance may decline but who maintain strong ethical and relational capital.  
665 Positioning these players as mentors, ambassadors, or symbols of club values can sustain their  
666 positive influence on fan attachment and preserve brand equity.

667 For sponsor brands, the configurational approach from the fsQCA analysis offers valuable  
668 insights. Rather than focusing on isolated traits, brands can align with distinct yet effective  
669 player profiles. One pathway combines *player performance & style* with *relational & life*  
670 *narrative*, representing high-performing players with emotionally resonant stories. Other  
671 centers on ethical and relational traits, even without elite performance, suggest that perceived  
672 integrity and empathy can drive endorsement success. In practical terms, this suggests that  
673 sponsorship activation strategies should prioritize authentic storytelling and athletes' life  
674 narratives rather than relying primarily on appearance-based marketing. By highlighting  
675 resilience, overcoming adversity, or community engagement, sponsors can create deeper  
676 emotional connections with fans. These insights reinforce the importance of athlete-brand  
677 congruence in consumer persuasion, as noted by Kucharska *et al.* (2020) and Mahmoudian *et*

678 *al.* (2021). Additionally, segmentation strategies can be developed by tailoring brand  
679 communication to distinct fan groups, highlighting different brand image dimensions  
680 depending on the audience—such as ethical behavior for value-driven fans, or performance and  
681 style for highly competitive-oriented fans.

682 Ultimately, the findings underscore the need for aligning footballers' brand images with  
683 fans' symbolic expectations. Effective branding goes beyond visibility or aesthetics; it requires  
684 coherent narratives that convey personal authenticity and cultural values. Stakeholders who  
685 leverage these dimensions can foster lasting fan relationships and sustainable brand equity.

## 686 **Limitations and Future Research**

687 Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that suggest avenues for future  
688 research.

689 First, the sample consisted mainly of young male fans from central Spain, recruited through  
690 convenience sampling. Although relevant to the football market (Kucharska *et al.*, 2020), this  
691 demographic narrowness limits the generalizability of findings. More specifically, the exclusive  
692 focus on Generation Z—while strategically justified due to their high digital engagement and  
693 emotional responsiveness to athlete branding—may constrain the theoretical scope of the study.  
694 Emotional attachment mechanisms and endorsement effectiveness may vary across age cohorts,  
695 as older fans could prioritize team loyalty, tradition, or long-term identification over  
696 authenticity narratives or lifestyle alignment. Moreover, although player selection was guided  
697 by visibility, awards, and media prominence—rather than proportional representation by club—  
698 future studies might examine how team affiliation or local identity influence fans' perceptions  
699 of athlete brand image. Future research should diversify samples by gender, age, and cultural  
700 background to test the robustness of the proposed relationships across broader audiences.

701       Second, while the study applied fsQCA, it did not consider moderators like gender, fan  
702 identity strength, or media consumption. These variables may shape the strength and direction  
703 of the relationships observed, and their inclusion could reveal important subgroup differences  
704 in how fans relate to athletes. Examining these factors could clarify when and for whom  
705 different brand image configurations are most impactful (Zheng & Xu, 2024). Future research  
706 should test such moderating effects to enhance the explanatory depth and practical relevance of  
707 athlete brand models.

708       Third, the unexpected negative or non-significant effects of attractive appearance (notably  
709 *physical attractiveness* and *body fit*) align with studies questioning the emotional impact of  
710 visual traits (Shibin & Azees, 2024; Väättäinen & Dickenson, 2019). Given the predominantly  
711 male sample, aesthetic dimensions may be seen as commercially constructed rather than  
712 authentic. Future research should explore whether this pattern persists among female fans or in  
713 cultures where visual appeal holds greater symbolic weight. Additionally, although the rivalry  
714 dimension holds theoretical relevance—particularly for highly identified or club-loyal fans—it  
715 was excluded due to low psychometric quality in this study. Future research could explore this  
716 construct with refined measurement tools, especially in contexts where rivalry is central to fan  
717 identity.

718       Overall, advancing this research stream would benefit from cross-cultural replication,  
719 exploration of moderating variables, and fan segmentation strategies to better capture the  
720 nuanced ways in which footballers' brand image dimensions influence emotional and behavioral  
721 outcomes.

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