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HERITAGE SPORT, MODERN FANS: BRAND PERSONALITY AND FAN LOYALTY IN THE MALAYSIAN SEPAK TAKRAW LEAGUE

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Abstract:

This study investigates the brand personality dimensions of the Malaysian Sepak Takraw League (STL) and their influence on fan loyalty through a sequential mediation pathway involving emotional attachment, fan engagement, and brand trust. Despite growing interest in sport branding, limited empirical research has examined how brand personality influences fan loyalty in indigenous sports, particularly through the psychological mechanisms that connect brand perceptions with long-term behavioural commitment. A quantitative cross-sectional research design was employed and data from 500 STL supporters were analysed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) via SmartPLS 4. Six culturally adapted brand personality dimensions were identified and validated: Success and Competence, Talent and Quality, Entertainment, Dedication and Effort, Admiration and Respect, and Care and Responsibility. The results supported all seventeen hypothesised relationships, confirming that emotional attachment, fan engagement, and brand trust jointly mediate the relationship between brand personality and fan loyalty. Talent and Quality emerged as the strongest predictor of Emotional Attachment ($\beta = 0.250$), which collectively explained 71.6% of its variance ($R^2 = 0.716$). The findings advance sport brand personality theory by establishing a validated sequential mediation model applicable to indigenous sport leagues in developing economies, with practical implications for fan development strategy and youth sport participation programmes.

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Brand Personality; Consumer Behaviour; Fan Loyalty; Fan Psychology; Indigenous Sport; Malaysia; Relationship Marketing; Sequential Mediation; Sepak Takraw; Sport Branding

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Introduction

In the last twenty years sport branding scholarship has rapidly increased but a great empirical gap can still be found in the literature. Brand personality has been well studied in the context of the professional mainstream sports market in the western world but has not been much studied in the indigenous traditional sports market in developing economies. Most importantly, the psychological mechanisms through which brand personality translates into enduring fan loyalty have received limited empirical attention, especially in non-Western cultural contexts. Evidence from the emerging professional sport league in Asia is particularly limited, and no prior study has examined these dynamics within the context of Malaysian traditional sport.

The Malaysian Sepak Takraw League (STL) is an interesting and potentially valuable subject for research. With Sepak Takraw is once again achieving renewed international success and with the current trend of greater commercialisation of Malaysian sepak takraw, one pivotal question remains: does the league have a brand personality to turn interest among the spectators into lasting fan loyalty? One of the most significant factors of fan-brand relationships is a sense of brand personality (human characteristics which are attributed to a sport entity) (Aaker, 1997; Kunkel, Funk & Hill, 2013). However, in STL context this question has never been approached in an empirical manner.

This study continues the line of thought of sport brand personality theory by exploring a sequential mediation chain between brand personality and brand loyalty via emotional attachment, fan engagement, and brand trust. Different from the previous sport branding studies focused on an individual mediator, here we suggest the sequential mediation models and then validate these models with the purpose of explaining precisely how brand personality is translated into continuous fan loyalty in three consecutive psychological phases. This theoretical structure is unique in the literature on sport branding and forms the major theoretical contribution of this investigation.

The STL also enjoys a unique status in Malaysian school sport because it is a sport that is contested annually via the Majlis Sukan Sekolah Malaysia (MSSM) in the Under-12, Under-15 and Under-18 categories and through the Klinik STL programme, more than 1300 youth participants were reached in 2025 (Astro, 2025; MSSM, 2026). While these touchpoints are strong ones for fans to develop, there has been no platform that is backed up by facts and

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parameters which could help translate exposure to brand loyalty. This study will fill those gaps by setting three research objectives: To identify and conceptualise the brand personality dimensions of the STL as perceived by its fans; To examine the sequential mediating roles of emotional attachment, fan engagement, and brand trust in the relationship between brand personality and fan loyalty; To develop and validate a strategic brand personality framework to guide the STL in sustainable development as a national sport brand.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

The sequential mediation framework proposed in this study draws on four well-established theoretical traditions. The conceptual framework for understanding how human attributes attributed to a league impact on the fans' perceptions and behavioural responses is Brand Personality theory as presented by Kunkel, Funk and Hill (2013) and based on Aaker (1997). The assumption in this study is based on Attachment Theory which has been adapted to the consumer-brand context by Thomson, MacInnis and Park (2005) and which states that perceptions of brand personality create affective or emotional ties between the fan and the league. The conceptualisation of fan engagement and brand trust can be based on Relationship Marketing Theory which views brand as a relational mechanism that deeply enhances and continues the fan-league relationship (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Fournier, 1998). Lastly, conceptually the sequence from brand perception to brand attachment, to brand engagement to brand trust and brand loyalty allegiance is theoretically embedded within the Psychological Continuum Model (Funk & James, 2001).

Brand Personality in Sport

Brand personality is defined as a constellation of human attributes that can be attributed to a brand (Aaker, 1997). In sport management context, the concept can also be applied to sport organisations, such as leagues and sport governing bodies, where fans develop relationships with sport organisations that compare to the relationships they develop with people, ascribing to sport entities personality traits that represent how the sport entity appears and stands (Kunkel, Funk & Lock, 2017). Aaker's (1997) basic framework has established five dimensions of brand personality: Sincerity, Excitement, Competence, Sophistication and Ruggedness. Although commonly used, the framework still requires cultural adaptation. For collectivist cultures with long-term orientation with high institutional respect such as Malaysian culture that has been described by Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov (2010), dimensions like Ruggedness and Sophistication do not have a significant implication.

The Kunkel et al. (2013) perspective was sport-specific as they drew on the Consumer-Based League Brand Association (CBLBA) framework, which highlights four branding associations with which fans appraise league brands: product quality, organisational attributes, social interaction, and historical heritage. This was then further contributed to by Ross (2006), who placed sport brand equity in the placement of identification within culture and community. Drawing on these frameworks alongside Hofstede et al. (2010), six culturally adapted brand personality dimensions were developed for the STL context: Success and Competence, Talent and Quality, Entertainment, Dedication and Effort, Admiration and Respect, and Care and Responsibility.

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Fan Loyalty

Oliver (1999) defines fan loyalty as an internalised inclination to engage in ongoing, behaviourally intended attitudinal support for a sport choice under circumstances of opposition. Research makes the distinction between attitudinal and behavioural loyalty; attitudinal loyalty involves the emotional level of commitment to and identification with the brand, while behavioural loyalty involves observable behaviours like attendance, media consumption, and word-of-mouth advocacy (Funk & James, 2001). The fan loyalty of the present study is a combination of both dimensions. The development of the sport allegiances of younger audiences is especially significant from a strategic perspective for the STL; individuals who develop their sport allegiance as teenagers are likely to keep this allegiance into adulthood making touchpoints such as the Klinik STL, and MSSM, which draw younger audiences, to be strategically important fan socialisation portals.

Emotional Attachment, Fan Engagement, and Brand Trust as Sequential Mediators

The influence of brand personality on fan loyalty can be understood as a series of psychological and relational processes. First, as the mediator between brand personality perceptions and affective commitment, emotional attachment, which is a strength of the affective connection between a fan and a sport entity (Thomson, MacInnis & Park, 2005) is proposed. second mediator between emotional attachment and active relational investment is fan engagement which was conceptualised as multi-dimensional cognitive, emotional, and behavioural involvement with activities related to the league of the sport team (Brodie, Hollebeek, Juric & Ilic, 2011). The willingness of the fan to rely on the league to deliver what it promises is the third intermediary between engagement and long-term loyalty, which is referred to as brand trust (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). From this theoretical background seventeen hypotheses were drawn up, including the direct relationships between each neighboring construct and the complete indirectly pathways by way of successive combinations of intervening constructs.

Methodology

Research Design and Participants

The philosophy of this study is rooted in post-positivism, and the research design was a quantitative study with a cross-sectional approach to test the sequential mediation model. 500 STL supporters responded, and their data was analysed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) using the SmartPLS 4 software and investigated sixteen hypotheses spanning across seventeen structural paths, which allowed for a simultaneous evaluation of the measurement model and the postulated effect of the sequential mediations. Hair, Risher, Sarstedt, and Ringle (2019) chose PLS-SEM to overcome several challenges that arise with covariance-based modelling, including the ability to handle non-normal data distributions, the capacity to accommodate for complex mediating patterns, and its suitability for prediction-oriented research studies in social science contexts. Target population consisted of Malaysian STL fans defined as those who use any medium to follow the league such as in-person attendance, television broadcast or via digital platforms. Data were collected through two parallel channels: stadium-based administration at STL matches and online administration through Sepak Takraw-dedicated social media platforms.

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Measurement Instrument

The questions were created especially for this study, on a structured self-report questionnaire (46 questions). Each was rated using a seven-point likert scale demonstrating a range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The six brand personality dimension scales were a result of constructive aggregation and adaptation based on the theories of Aaker (1997), Kunkel, Funk and Hill (2013), Ross (2006). Measurement of emotional attachment items were adapted from Thomson, MacInnis and Park (2005), fan engagement items were adapted from Brodie et al. (2011), brand trust items were adapted from Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) and fan loyalty items were adapted from Oliver (1999) and Funk and James (2001). The instrument was content validly reviewed and pilot tested before the full administration.

Data Analysis

The analysis was done in two stages. The first stage tested the measurement model in terms of indicator reliability, composite reliability, AVE, and HTMT. The second stage tested the structural model, which presents path coefficients (β), coefficient of determination (R^2) and effect sizes (f^2) for all the assumed relations. Sequential mediation was tested according to Hayes (2018); bias corrected 95% CI for all indirect effects were obtained with 5,000 subsamples using bootstrapping. A two-tailed p-value of <0.05 was considered to be statistically significant.

Findings

Measurement Model Assessment

The psychometric properties of all ten constructs were satisfactory. Most indicator loadings were greater than the recommended value of 0.70, indicating reliability of the indicators (Hair et al., 2019). The results for internal consistency indicated that all the composite reliability values were 0.70 or higher. All constructs had average variance extracted (AVE) values of >0.50, which indicated that they are convergently valid. Regarding the HTMT criterion, as recommended by Henseler, Ringle and Sarstedt (2015), the values should not exceed 0.85, which was solved as the results were below this threshold for all constructs, thus confirming their discriminant validity.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics of all constructs of studies are shown in Table 1. Respondents' perception of all 6 dimensions of brand personality was measured at a moderate level, with Entertainment showing the highest mean (M = 5.233, SD = 1.465) and Success and Competence the lowest (M = 4.785, SD = 1.392). Among the mediating and outcome constructs, Fan Engagement recorded the highest mean (M = 6.165, SD = 0.991), followed by Fan Loyalty (M = 5.627, SD = 1.108), Brand Trust (M = 5.563, SD = 1.105), and Emotional Attachment (M = 5.519, SD = 1.632), all categorised at a high level.

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Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Study Constructs

Construct	Mean (M)	Std. Dev. (SD)	Category
Success and Competence	4.785	1.392	Moderate
Talent and Quality	4.978	1.391	Moderate
Entertainment	5.233	1.465	Moderate
Dedication and Effort	4.803	1.426	Moderate
Admiration and Respect	4.827	1.668	Moderate
Care and Responsibility	4.811	1.577	Moderate
Emotional Attachment	5.519	1.632	High
Fan Engagement	6.165	0.991	High
Brand Trust	5.563	1.105	High
Fan Loyalty	5.627	1.108	High

Source: Primary Data (2026)

Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

All 17 hypothesised relationships were supported, indicating that the interaction among emotional attachment, fan engagement, and brand trust mediates the relationship between the brand personality dimensions and fan loyalty. The direct effects of path and significance levels are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Structural Model Results

H	Relationship	Path Coefficient	p-value	Decision
H1	Success and Competence → Emotional Attachment	$\beta = 0.236$	$p < 0.001$	**Supported**
H2	Talent and Quality → Emotional Attachment	$\beta = 0.250$	$p < 0.001$	**Supported**
H3	Entertainment → Emotional Attachment	$\beta = 0.186$	$p < 0.001$	**Supported**
H4	Dedication and Effort → Emotional Attachment	$\beta = 0.098$	$p < 0.05$	**Supported**

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H5	Admiration and Respect → Emotional Attachment	β = 0.112	p < 0.05	**Supported**
H6	Care and Responsibility → Emotional Attachment	β = 0.124	p < 0.05	**Supported**
H7	Emotional Attachment → Fan Engagement	β = 0.456	p < 0.001	**Supported**
H8	Fan Engagement → Brand Trust	β = 0.106	p < 0.05	**Supported**
H9	Brand Trust → Fan Loyalty	β = 0.267	p < 0.001	**Supported**
H10–H17	Indirect (sequential mediation) effects	All CIs exclude zero	p < 0.05	**Supported**

Note: β = standardised path coefficient; CI = confidence interval

Among the direct effects on Emotional Attachment, Talent and Quality emerged as the strongest predictor (β = 0.250, p < 0.001), followed by Success and Competence (β = 0.236, p < 0.001), Entertainment (β = 0.186, p < 0.001), and Care and Responsibility (β = 0.124, p < 0.05). The overall R^2 value for the six brand personality dimensions of Emotional Attachment was 0.716 accounting for 71.6% of variance, thus suggesting high predictive power. Emotional Attachment strongly predicted Fan Engagement (β = 0.456, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.208). Fan Engagement predicted Brand Trust (β = 0.106, p < 0.05), and Brand Trust predicted Fan Loyalty (β = 0.267, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.071). The results of the indirect effects analysis showed that the chain of sequential mediation was significant, as bootstrapped confidence intervals excluded zero across all six brand personality dimensions.

Discussion

What The Brand Personality Profile Reveals

The results reveal that Entertainment was the most strongly perceived brand personality dimension, which means that "fun" is something fundamental to the way fans experience Sepak Takraw. The nature of the sport, with its acrobatic athleticism, speed, precision and aerial dynamism makes it inherently interesting to watch. This is consistent with Bauer et al. (2008) and Kunkel et al. (2013) who believe that one of the primary factors for joining non-mainstream sport leagues is entertainment. Importantly, Success and Competence had the lowest mean rating out of the six dimensions, even though there is a recent improvement in success on a top level for Malaysia. Between on-field and brand perception is the fact that success in sports does not necessarily provide the right to organisational credibility. This has to be bridged by targeted brand communication and should methodologically showcase major aspects of the league's achievements, structure and long-term vision.

The Primacy of Emotional Attachment

The structural model reveals that the brand personality to fan outcome relationship, with the highest R^2 value of 0.716, is mediated by the Emotional Attachment construct. It contributes to

the current theory in the sense that it shows the dimensions of brand personality are cumulative to the creation of affective commitment and that this affective commitment is the foundation of all subsequent processes towards cultivating loyalty. As much as fans need to be passively exposed to develop engagement or loyalty, they must be emotionally connected through regular, culturally relevant communication and the journeys created within the league. Some, such as the perceived match quality, social identity, and digital media interaction, are also hypothesised to influence these constructs and are suggested as additional constructs to be explored in future research, given the relatively weak R^2 values of 0.011 for Brand Trust and 0.071 for Fan Loyalty.

Practical Implications

Results will help sport organisations to develop practices around emotionally artful branding, community-based fan development and youth involvement to retain supporters. The primacy of Talent and Quality and Success and Competence as drivers of Emotional Attachment means that investments in raising the perceived level of talent through performance metrics, upgrading broadcast production, and telling the stories of athletes represent the top-priority brand development actions. The finding that emotional attachment is the gateway mechanism also indicates that community engagement programmes, cultural heritage events and fan recognition initiatives are theoretically more valuable for developing long-term loyalty than purely commercial activation strategies. The validated framework gives policymakers solid evidence bases to develop existing youth touchpoints, such as the Klinik STL programme and the MSSM, from talent identification pipelines into structured fan loyalty development channels.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that brand personality significantly influences fan loyalty in this emerging traditional sport league and that the influence is sequential. The six dimensions of brand personality that were validated in this research can be used as an empirical basis in understanding and strategically developing the brand identity of STL, namely Success and Competence, Talent and Quality, Entertainment, Dedication and Effort, Admiration and Respect, and Care and Responsibility.

Sport brand personality literature has been expanded with the validated framework demonstrating that this relationship does not operate directly between sport brand personality and fan loyalty, but rather a sequential chain of emotional attachment, fan engagement, and brand trust. The implications of this discovery for the sport branding literature are located within the context of an emerging market as well as theoretically informing the emerging professional sport leagues who can make use of it as a tool to foster fan loyalty. This research offers both a theoretical explanation and empirical insights on how and why a brand strategy and a fan engagement programme can be implemented, to help traditional sport leagues all over Southeast Asia and beyond to build commercially successful brands while safeguarding their cultural legacy and heritage for future generations through investments in youth development. Future studies should consider the opportunities for extension of the framework to other indigenous sport leagues in the region and the influence of digital media engagement and the national cultural identity as moderators in the relationship between brand personality and fan loyalty.

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