Examining the Antecedents of Professional Baseball Fans' Brand Love: A Cognitive Appraisal Theory Perspective

Pei-Hsin, Fang[1], Jye-Shyan, Wang[2]
1.Southern Taiwan University of Science and Technology
2.National Taiwan Normal University

OUTLINE

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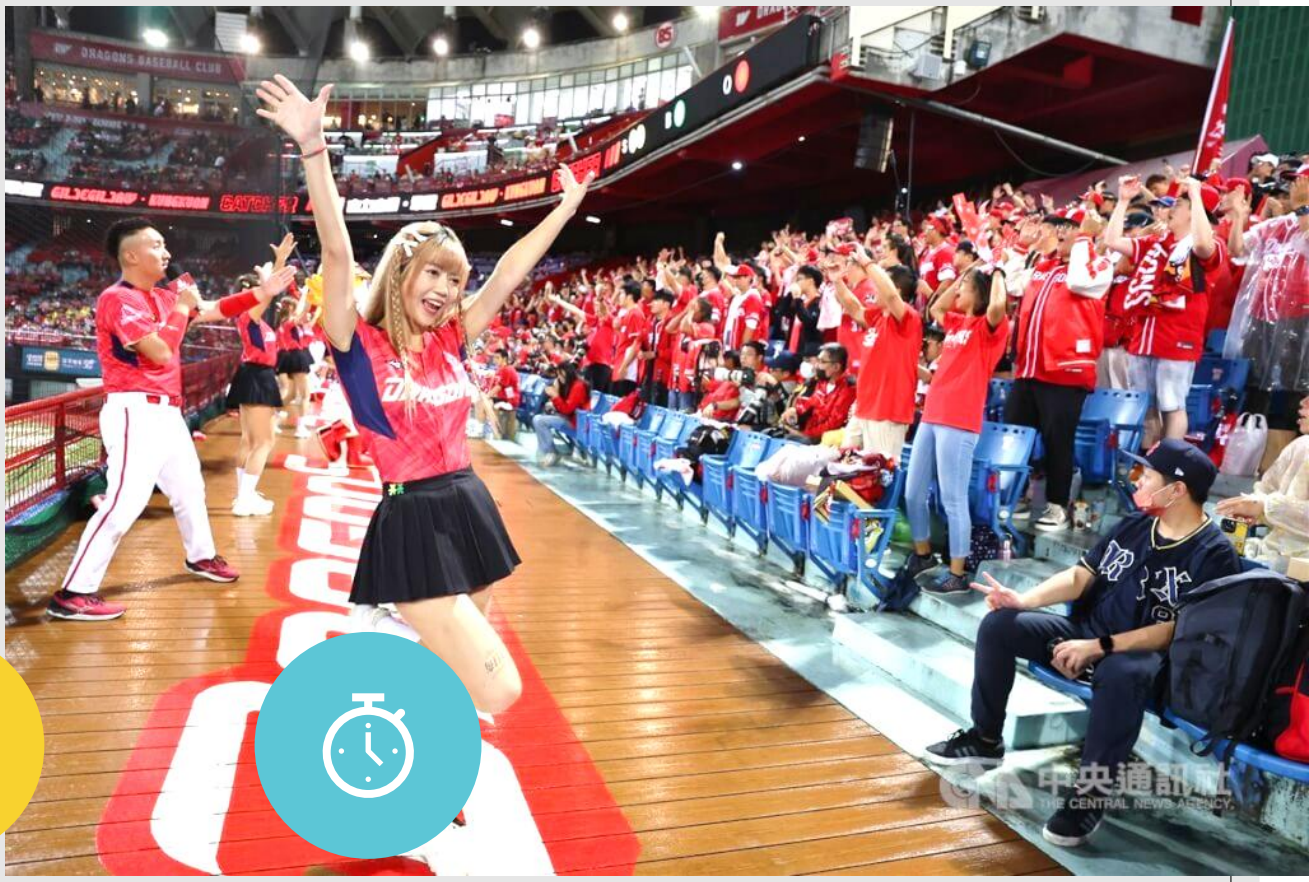

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Introduction

- In the context of professional sports, brand establishment and management serve as strategic mechanisms of relationship marketing, enabling teams to sustain and reinforce long-term relational bonds with their fan base.
- Sports fans are regarded as demonstrating strong emotional attachment and loyalty toward their teams, and their consumption decisions (such as attending sporting events) are not necessarily determined by financial or rational criteria (Parganas, Papadimitriou, Anagnostopoulos, & Theodoropoulos, 2017).
- ***This unique characteristic motivated us to study how brand love develops in sports fandom.***

Brand Love

- Brand love, defined as "the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name" (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006), is elicited by brand image, brand experience, marketing activities, and brand–consumer interactions.
- It produces loyalty, repurchase intention, willingness to pay a premium, resistance to negative information, and advocacy, commitment (Christino, Silva, Moura, & Fonseca, 2020).
- While there are established scales of brand love (Batra et al., 2012; Chang, Fang, & Wang, 2014), the antecedents unique to sports fans remain underexplored.
- ***This gap forms the core of our study.***

Cognitive Appraisal Theory

- Cognitive appraisal theory has been widely used to explore the origins and triggers of consumer emotions, as well as their resulting behavioral outcomes.
- Scherer (2009) identified four stimulus evaluation checks—relevance, implication, coping potential, and normative significance. These appraisal dimensions shape affective responses and drive consumer behaviors.
- Subsequent research demonstrates novelty significantly influences emotional intensity and memory retention in experiential contexts (Skavronskaya, Moyle, & Scott, 2020)
- ***Thus, we hypothesized that cognitive appraisal factors would explain brand love among baseball fans.***

Method

- A mixed-methods design.
- Fans of the Chinese Professional Baseball League (CPBL) aged 18 years or older.
- Grounded theory was applied to explore fans' cognitive appraisal factors and brand love. In-depth interviews were conducted, with 28 fans representing five CPBL teams.
- Based on the qualitative results, we developed draft scales of cognitive appraisal and brand love.
- Scale testing procedures included content validity index (CVI), item analysis, exploratory factor analysis, and confirmatory factor analysis.
- Regression analysis was conducted to examine the predictive model of brand love.

Results and Discussion

- Qualitative Results
- Results of Scale Development
- Result of Regression Analysis



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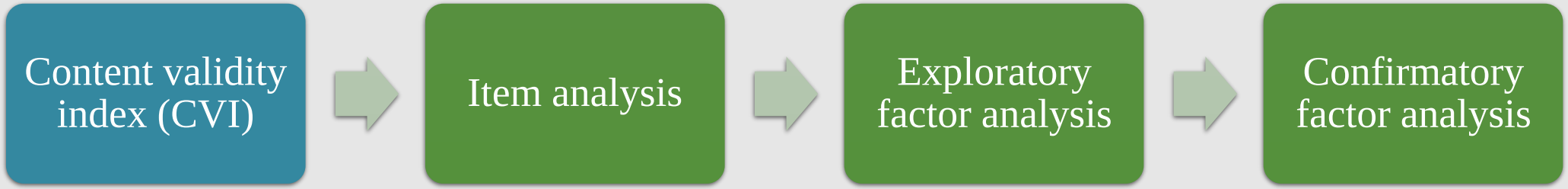
Qualitative Results- Cognitive Appraisal

Selective codes	Axial codes	Open codes
Relevance	novelty	(1)The thrill of a first-time game experience; (2)A memorable highlight; (3)A come-from-behind victory; (4)Following star players; (5)The team lineup
	goal relevance	(1)Stress relief through watching games; (2)Interaction with players; (3)Supporting baseball; (4)Social interaction among fans; (5)Seeing the team win; (6)A sense of belonging to the team
	intrinsic pleasantness	(1)An enjoyable experience; (2)A heart-stirring moment; (3)Engaging marketing activities; (4) A touching moment; (5)Positive feelings
Implication	unexpected experience	(1)First-time game experience; (2)Unexpected situations during the game; (3)The emotions experienced by fans; (4)The stadium atmosphere
	conduciveness	(1)Sense of belonging; (2)Interactive feedback; (3)Emotional connection with family and friends; (4)Emotional attachment
Normative significance	self-identity	(1)The team's image aligns with one's self-image
	social norms	(1)Positive image of the team;(2)Socially recognized values

Qualitative Results- Brand Love

Selective codes	Axial codes	Open codes
Driven behavior	passionate participation	(1)Attending games rain or shine; (2)Only watching games of the supported team; (3)Following the team to away games; (4)Participating in team activities; (5)Following star players
	willingness to invest resources	(1)Purchasing team merchandise; (2)Attending games regularly; (3)Purchasing season tickets; (4)Becoming a team member; (5)Investing effort in learning about baseball; (6)Investing time in learning about the team and players
Existential meaning	self-identity	(1)The team's image aligns with one's self-image; (2) The team's characteristic aligns with one's characteristic.
	memory making	(1)Creating memories with family and friends; (2) Baseball as a shared topic; (3)Strengthening bonds with family and friends
Affective connection	positive emotion	(1)Joy; (2)Passion; (3)Confidence; (4)Tolerance; (5)Devoted support
	negative emotion	(1)Feeling down with poor performance; (2)Anger over negative news; (3)Frustration during losing streaks
	long-term relationship maintenance	(1)Maintaining a long-term relationship with the team; (2)Stand by the team; (3)Following the team on social media

Results of Scale Development

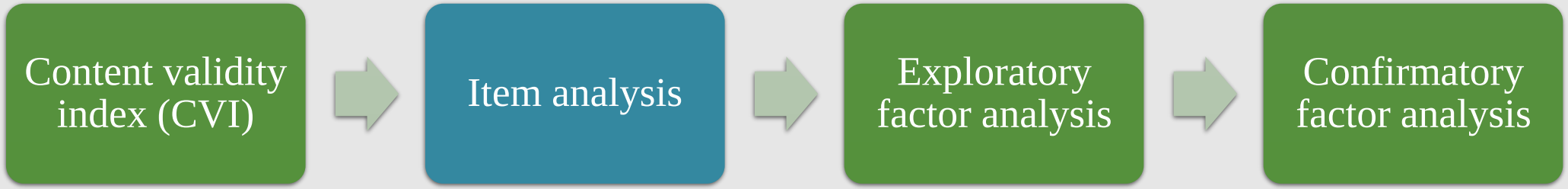


- 5 Experts used the content validity index (CVI) to evaluate draft scales.
- Cognitive appraisal scale: 28-item, six-dimension (self-identity was eliminated)

  eg. Attending a live game for the first time was a novel experience for me.
- Brand love scale: 29-item, seven-dimension

  eg. I’m really enthusiastic about the team.

Results of Scale Development



- An item analysis was carried out with 157 online samples.
- Cognitive appraisal scale: 25-item, six-dimension
- Brand love scale: 27-item, seven-dimension

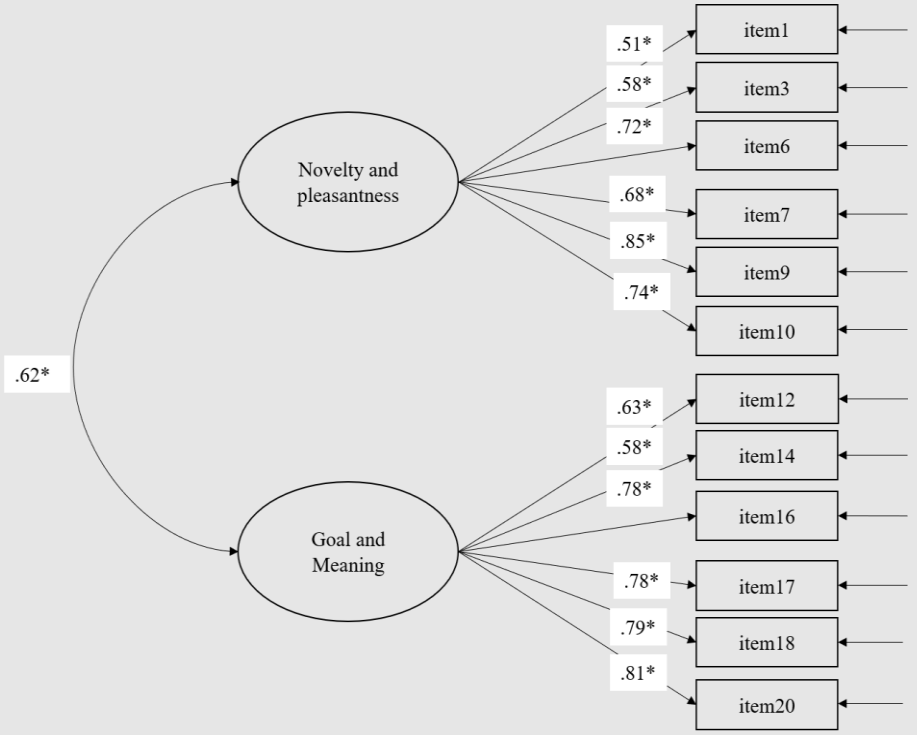
Result of EFA

Items	Factor	
	Goal and Meaning	**Novelty and Pleasantness**
1. Attending a live game for the first time was a novel experience for me.	-.003	.508
3. The team's comeback victory was impressive.	.124	.472
6. Attending a live game is an enjoyable experience.	-.048	.894
7. Attending a live game is a thrilling experience.	-.049	.673
9. Attending a live game is an emotional experience.	.129	.649
10. Attending a live game provides me with positive emotions.	.051	.582
12. Supporting the team fulfills my goal of interacting with the players.	.658	.083
14. Attending games fulfills my need for social interaction.	.538	.129
16. Supporting the team makes me feel like I am part of the team.	.914	-.072
17. Supporting the team gives me a sense of belonging.	.950	-.094
18. Receiving feedback or interaction from the team feels meaningful to me.	.724	.111
20. Supporting the team holds significant meaning for me.	.694	.023
Explained variance: %	47.09	6.45
Cumulative explained variance%	53.54	

Items	Factor		
	Long-term relationship	**Passionate participation**	**Self-identity**
1. I attend games regardless of the weather.	-.120	.730	.187
2. I travel to different places to support the team.	-.058	.789	-.017
4. I participate in events organized by the team.	-.016	.845	-.069
5. I follow my favorite players.	.079	.625	-.054
6. I am willing to pay for team membership.	.195	.657	-.057
7. I am willing to put effort into increasing my baseball knowledge.	.801	-.070	-.112
8. I am willing to spend time learning more about the team.	.888	-.077	-.110
9. I am willing to purchase the team's merchandise.	.635	.151	.050
10. I am willing to continue purchasing tickets to attend games.	.696	.093	.001
11. The image presented by the team matches my personal image.	.231	-.075	.706
12. Supporting the team allows me to express my personal characteristics.	-.018	-.042	.978
13. Supporting the team helps me look like the person I want to be.	-.062	.118	.794
18. I'm really enthusiastic about the team.	.604	.247	.065
19. My support for the team is not affected by its shortcomings.	.718	.036	.118
20. I have strong confidence in this team.	.711	-.011	.106
21. I feel happy when the team wins.	.699	-.135	-.017
25. I always stand by the team even when their performance is poor.	.784	-.062	.045
27. The team feels like a friend to me.	.501	.073	.157
28. I want to maintain a long-term relationship with the team.	.572	.127	.134
29. I join the team's social media to follow related updates.	.767	.075	-.058
Explained variance: %	47.41	4.68	4.31
Cumulative explained variance%	56.40		

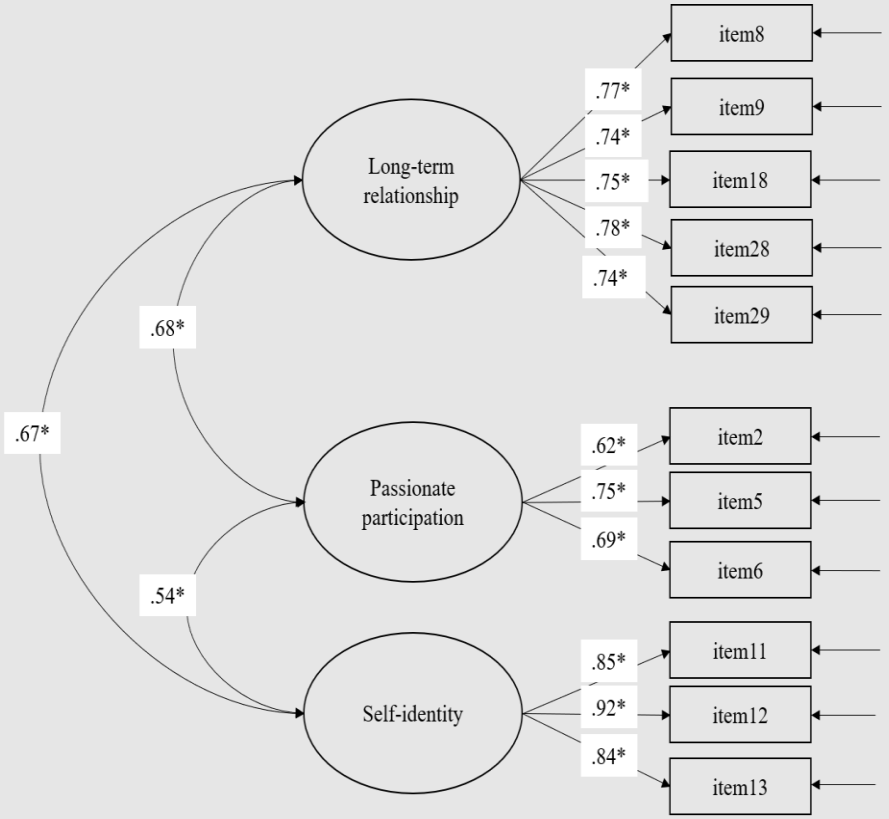
Result of CFA- Competition Model-Cognitive Appraisal

Model	χ^2/df	GFI	AGFI	RMR	RMSEA	NFI	TLI	CFI	IFI	PNFI	PGFI
First-order Orthogonal Model	9.370	.812	.873	.131	.129	.836	.817	.850	.851	.684	.605
First-order Oblique Model	4.713	.923	.887	.025	.086	.919	.919	.935	.935	.738	.627
Modified First-order Oblique Model	2.291	.962	.941	.016	.051	.963	.972	.979	.979	.729	.617
Criterion	< 3	>0.9	>0.9	< 0.08	< 0.08	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	>0.5	>0.5



Result of CFA- Competition Model-Brand Love

Model	χ^2/df	GFI	AGFI	RMR	RMSEA	NFI	TLI	CFI	IFI	PNFI	PGFI
First-order Orthogonal Model	9.151	.762	.706	.228	.128	.771	.765	.790	.791	.690	.617
First-order Oblique Model	5.782	.828	.783	.039	.098	.858	.862	.879	.880	.754	.658
Modified First-order Oblique Model	2.831	.961	.938	.024	.060	.962	.967	.975	.975	.717	.597
Criterion	< 3	>0.9	>0.9	< 0.08	< 0.08	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	>0.5	>0.5



Result of Stepwise Regression Analysis

Outcome variable Brand love	B	Se	Beta	*t* value	*p* value
Goal and meaning	.700	.025	.686	27.694	.000
number of attendances/Monthly	.026	.005	.116	4.720	.000
years of attendance	.007	.002	.113	3.830	.000
age	-.004	.002	-.065	-2.210	.027
	R^2= .539；△R^2= .537；F(4, 788)= 230.776，p= .000				

Note: *p < .05. D-W value= 1.970; VIF value is between 1.035 and 1.428.

Discussion

- Compared with the study of Chang, et al., (2014), brand love is measured through seven dimensions: passionate participation, willingness to invest, self-identity, creation of shared memories, positive emotions, negative emotions, and long-term relationship.
- In this study, brand love is composed of passionate participation, self-identity, and long-term relationship; however, willingness to invest is embedded within long-term relationship.
- The scale is more streamlined.

Discussion

- “Goal and Meaning” is equivalent to the integration of “goal relevance” and “conduciveness” in cognitive appraisal.
- This study found that “goal and meaning” will foster brand love.
  - For a fan, attending live games is not only a source of positive emotions but also a way to interact with players and connect socially. Supporting the team fosters a sense of belonging and identity, making the fan feel like part of the team.
  - This interaction and recognition from the team give deeper meaning to the experience, turning spectatorship into a personally significant practice.

Discussion

- This study found that the deeper the fans' involvement, the stronger their brand love.
  - Greater involvement entails greater investments of time, money, and emotional resources, which in turn may enhance fans' positive evaluations of the team or brand.
  - For baseball fans, high levels of leisure involvement are associated with stronger organizational commitment to the team (Pan et al., 2018).
- Age was found to be a negative predictor of brand love.
  - When consuming hedonic products, Millennials tend to show more emotional consumption behavior, such as positive emotions and higher levels of confidence in their choices (e.g. Getz & Carlsen, 2008).
  - These traits are likely to apply to spectator sport because it is also a hedonic product (Yim, et al., 2021).

Conclusion

- Fan perceptions of team alignment with personal needs and goals, meaning derived from support (e.g., interpersonal interaction, belonging), and higher involvement enhance brand love.
- These results corroborate findings by Yang, Lu, and Sun (2018), underscoring the pivotal role of cognitive appraisal and fan engagement in shaping emotional bonds with professional sports brands, shaping fan–brand relationships.

Implication

- Salient cognitive appraisal elements can elicit brand love among spectators; therefore, professional sports teams should prioritize fans' psychological and emotional responses.
- By designing novel game-day experiences and implementing marketing strategies that foster a sense of belonging and value congruence, teams can provide psychological gratification that facilitates the development of brand love.
- ***Brand love is not only about winning games- it is about creating meaningful experiences.***

Thank you for your attention.

南臺科技大學
Southern Taiwan University of Science and Technology

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