

# Antecedents and consequences of brand tribes in sports organizations: the role of brand personality dimensions

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study examines how the brand personality dimensions of a sports brand organization influence brand tribalism, and the subsequent effects of tribalism on three consumer behavioral responses: loyalty, WOM, and recruitment.

**Theoretical framework** – We base our conceptualization of sports brand personality on Tsiotsou's (2012) model of brand personality, with five dimensions: competitiveness, prestige, morality, authenticity, and credibility. The study also uses Taute and Sierra's (2014) model of brand tribalism, with four dimensions: lineage, social structure, sense of community, and defense of the tribe.

**Design/methodology/approach** – We present a theoretical model estimated using data from a sample of 1,662 soccer fans of Spanish LaLiga clubs. The model is estimated using the PLS algorithm.

**Findings** – We show that brand morality, prestige, and competitiveness have a positive influence on brand tribalism, while brand credibility and authenticity have a negative or non-significant influence on tribalism. Our results also support the notion that sports brand tribalism encourages fans to be more loyal and to engage in more positive WOM and recruitment behaviors.

**Practical & social implications of research** – Managers should focus on improving the perceived morality (sustainable and socially responsible behaviors), prestige, and competitiveness of the sports brand.

**Originality/value** – We show which dimensions of a sports brand personality influence brand tribalism, and its subsequent behavioral effects.

**Keywords:** Brand tribalism, brand personality, brand loyalty, word-of-mouth, PLS modeling.

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## 1 Introduction

Postmodernism has witnessed a process in which the individual has been stripped of all forms of communal mediation and individualism has experienced significant growth (Gbadamosi, 2020). The traditional sources of social identification, such as religion, nation, or race, have lost their importance (Cova and Cova, 2001), and in the absence of references, the individual looks to the consumer system to forge his or her identity (Jeong et al., 2020). In this sense, the acquisition of goods has been used to exchange signs and images, and consumption has become central to the construction of an individual's self-concept (Japutra et al., 2023). This phenomenon has created new communities, such as brand tribes, where individuals can share different interests and achieve a sense of belonging (Sierra and Taute, 2019; Cova and Cova, 2002).

Brand tribes have been defined as networks of heterogeneous people - in terms of age, sex, income, etc. - connected by a shared passion or emotion related to a brand (Cova and Cova, 2001; Sierra and Taute, 2019). Previous literature has analyzed the antecedents of brand tribe formation, as well as its consequences in terms of the behaviors of tribe members. For example, some of the antecedents of brand tribalism that have been previously studied are the associative behavior of members (Moutinho et al., 2007), the perceived value of the brand (Loureiro and Kaufmann, 2016), the expressive self-concept of the consumer (Liu et al., 2017), and brand trust (Tsiotsou, 2013; Choi and Yang, 2020). Second, some of the consequences that have been investigated are loyalty (Goncalves Filho et al., 2022), brand commitment (Choi and Yang, 2020), and word of mouth (i.e., WOM) (Badrinarayanan et al., 2014).

In this respect, it is curious that brand personality, one of the brand attributes with the greatest capacity to generate major relational outcomes with consumers (Youn and Doodoo, 2021), has hardly been studied in the previous literature as an antecedent of tribalism; and when it has been, it has been analyzed in a one-dimensional way (Tsiotsou and Veloutsou, 2011), or configured it as a second-order construct (Aji and Muslichah, 2023) in such a way that, to the best of our knowledge, no research has analyzed which specific brand personality dimensions (i.e., authenticity, credibility, morality, prestige, and competitiveness) (Tsiotsou, 2012) influence brand tribalism and its subsequent behavioral consequences.

Brand managers can decide which brand personality dimensions are most relevant to the overall positioning strategy of the company, or which are most prominent in a more tactical promotional campaign. Therefore, knowing specifically whether these brand personality dimensions are capable of promoting tribal responses in their audiences can be very useful information for brand managers.

Thus, the main purpose of this study is to analyze the influence of a sports organization's brand personality dimensions on brand tribalism, and the effects of tribalism on three fan behavioral responses: loyalty, WOM, and recruitment. We focus our research on sports brands. Sports organizations are of great social and economic importance in contemporary society (Zhang et al., 2018). Most citizens practice some form of sport, and millions of followers watch many sporting events every year. More specifically, professional teams today constitute strong and unique brands that generate millions of dollars in revenue, thanks to the increasing importance of marketing in their management models (Sierra and Taute, 2019; Naraine et al., 2022).

Therefore, this article will first review the key theoretical aspects of brand tribalism in sports organizations, its antecedents, and its consequences in relation to brand personality. Based on this review and the fundamental assumptions of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986), we formulate a theoretical model that analyzes the influence of brand personality on tribalism in sports organizations and its effects on fans' behavior. An explanation will then be given of the key steps of the methodology used in the empirical study to test the theoretical model, followed by the presentation and discussion of the results. Finally, the study's conclusions, managerial implications, and limitations will be discussed.

## 2 Conceptual background

### 2.1 Brand tribalism

The brand tribe is a relatively new construct in social theory (Tuominen, 2011). The term was first coined by Maffesoli (1996), who described it as a new form of sociality and defined it as a collective form of identification based on feelings rather than rationality. Since then, various authors have attempted to define the concept more precisely. For example, Veloutsou and Moutinho (2009) defined it as a social network of

micro-groups in which individuals share strong emotional bonds, a common subculture, and a view of life; Cova and Dalli (2009) defined it as a group of people with a common interest in a particular activity/object who create a parallel social universe (subculture) with its own myths, values, rituals, vocabulary, and hierarchy; and Tsiotsou (2015) defined it as a set of individuals who create an informal brand group and exhibit tribal behavior.

A review of the previous literature on brand tribalism shows that the brand tribe has been conceptualized and that researchers have begun to model the construct and describe its different constituent dimensions. Four major proposals have been identified.

First, Veloutsou and Moutinho (2009) identified five dimensions: *reference group acceptance*; *social visibility* of the brand; *degree of fit with (the consumer's) lifestyle*; *passion in life*, which refers to the brand's contribution to the consumer's emotional life; and *collective memory*.

Second, Meir (2009) developed a model, which he applied to rugby fans, distinguishing between and defining four dimensions: *part of*, the feeling of being part of a group of tribe members who attend sporting events to support their team; *contribute*, the need felt by tribe members to collaborate with their team by supporting, shouting, encouraging, and pressuring rivals and referees; *together*, the ability to meet with other fans at matches; and *strength*, the sense of empowerment that tribe members feel when they use products related to the teams they support.

Third, Tsiotsou and Veloutsou (2012) defined a model of tribal behavior that distinguishes between four dimensions. *collective memory*, the consumer's knowledge of the brand and willingness to share it with other group members; *tribal identification*, the individual's perception of connectedness with the other tribe members; *reference group acceptance*, the perception of approval of the brand-related activities in which the individual participates; and *tribal commitment*, the degree of motivation to actively participate in tribe-related activities.

Finally, Taute and Sierra (2014) developed a model of brand tribalism with four dimensions: *lineage*, links with other tribe members; *social structure*, the tribe members' perceived sense of unity; *sense of community*, the tribe's ability to coexist in harmony; and *defense of the tribe*, the collective effort through which members confront other tribes in situations of competition or rivalry. In the present study, the dimensions proposed by Taute

and Sierra (2014) are used because the authors believe that these dimensions best fit the concept of tribalism in sports organizations and the measurement instrument is the most appropriate for the study context.

## 2.2 Sports brand personality

Aaker (1997) defined brand personality as the set of human characteristics associated with a brand and proposed a scale with five dimensions: sincerity (i.e., honest, genuine, and cheerful); excitement (i.e., daring, imaginative, and up-to-date); competence (i.e., reliable, dependable, and efficient); sophistication (i.e., glamorous, charming, and romantic); and ruggedness (i.e., tough, strong, and rugged).

Numerous investigations have attempted to validate Aaker's (1997) dimensional proposal in different categories of products, industries, or cultures (Sung and Tinkham, 2005). However, Aaker's (1997) model has received criticism for its questionable degree of replication and translation of the dimensions in other markets, industries, and cultural contexts. One of these areas is that of sports organizations. So, it has been argued that Aaker's (1997) brand personality dimensions may not apply in the field of sports (Carlson et al., 2009). Various studies have applied Aaker's scale in sports contexts with limited results (Mitsis and Leckie, 2016; Braunstein and Ross, 2010).

In this line, Tsiotsou (2012) developed a model of brand personality for the sports context, SPORTEAPE - the model identified five dimensions of the brand personality of sports teams: (i) Competitiveness, which reflects a team's ability to achieve its goals and beat its competitors. It fits descriptions such as proud, ambitious, dynamic, successful, winning, and triumphant. (ii) Prestige, associated with the team's superiority and recognition of its achievements, is defined by five elements: massive, glorious, great, strong, and honorable. (iii) Morality, which refers to the consumers' perceptions of the team's code of conduct. This is composed of three elements: principles, culture, and ethics. (iv) Authenticity, which reflects the uniqueness of the sports team. This dimension is made up of three elements: traditional, intransigent, and radical. (v) Credibility, which refers to whether a team inspires trust and confidence. It is composed of traits such as rich and predominant authenticity, credibility, morality, prestige, and competitiveness. This is the theoretical framework used in this study.

## 2.3 Behavioral consequences of tribalism in sports organizations: fan loyalty, WOM, and customer recruitment

### 2.3.1 Fan loyalty

Broadly, fan loyalty can be conceptualized as a fan's intention or predisposition to maintain his/her relationship with the same sports brand over time (Yun et al., 2021). Two approaches have traditionally been followed to define loyalty. The behavioral approach considers loyalty as the mere systematic repetition of purchases of the same product or service (i.e., attending games and purchasing team merchandise of the sports brand) (Wang et al., 2011). However, several authors have criticized the behavioral approach (Thakur, 2016), considering that a repeated purchase can be motivated by the lack of alternatives, but if those alternatives are eventually available in the market and the consumer has not been able to develop an attitudinal commitment to the brand, the repeated purchase behavior will end. Therefore, an attitudinal or affective dimension should also be considered in the definition of loyalty (Yun et al., 2021). The attitudinal dimension of loyalty makes it possible to distinguish between "spurious" loyalty and "true" loyalty (Bauer et al., 2008), defined as not simply the mere maintenance of the relationship with the sports brand (i.e., repeat purchase) because there are no other better alternatives, but the volitive response of the fan derived from a positive attitude towards the brand.

This bi-dimensional approach has been followed in this research, and loyalty has considered the repeated actions of fans, such as following and attending matches or convincing others to sympathize, but also an attitudinal dimension of willingness to expend future efforts supporting the team.

### 2.3.2 Word-of-mouth and fan recruitment

The word-of-mouth concept has evolved over the years; while it was initially conceived only as oral, personal communication, today it is accepted as any form of communication through which a non-financially motivated individual communicates (Harrison-Walker, 2001), gives advice, highlights positive and negative aspects, informs, and exchanges comments and thoughts (Martin, 2017) with a recipient who wants to know more about a product, service, brand, or consumer experience.

On the other hand, the process of acquiring new fans is fundamental for sports organizations. Fan recruitment, analogous to the construct of brand evangelism, refers to the specific word-of-mouth oriented to recruit new fans for the sports brand (Becerra and Badrinarayanan, 2013). Previous research suggests that a simple focus on WOM underestimates the extent to which some tribal consumers convince others about their favorite brands (Becerra and Badrinarayanan, 2013). Thus, fan recruitment is a more favorable fan behavior for the club than WOM: as a member of the brand tribe, the fan not only speaks well of or recommends the club, but also tries to incorporate active fans to go to the stadium, watch the matches on TV, etc.

## 3 Theoretical model

### 3.1 Overall logic of the model

Figure 1 graphically illustrates the study's theoretical model and hypotheses. The main logic of the model is the existence of a hierarchy of effects structure, in which perceptions about the brand personality dimensions enhance sports brand tribalism, and through this (i.e., mediated by it) enhance the fan's behavioral responses. Social Identity Theory (i.e., SIT) (Tajfel and Turner, 1986) is a classic theory capable of explaining how perceptions of brands influence consumer behavior, mediated by self-perceptions of how the individual is cognitively and emotionally linked to the brand and other consumers of the brand (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Currás-Pérez et al., 2009).

According to SIT, an individual can define him or herself, at least in part, based on his or her role as a consumer of a brand if he or she perceives him or herself as connected or close to the identity of that brand. The brand's personality traits (i.e., authenticity, credibility, morality, prestige, and competitiveness) are an expression of that brand's identity, so that if the consumer perceives him or herself as close or connected to that identity, he or she will form a kind of collective identity that will associate him or her with other individuals based on their common characteristic of being consumers of that brand (i.e., reinforcing brand tribalism). Mediated by this self-definition as a member of a brand tribe, the individual is motivated to perform favorable behaviors towards the brand (e.g., loyalty, WOM, and recruitment) because they can satisfy self-definitional needs (Currás-Pérez et al., 2009).



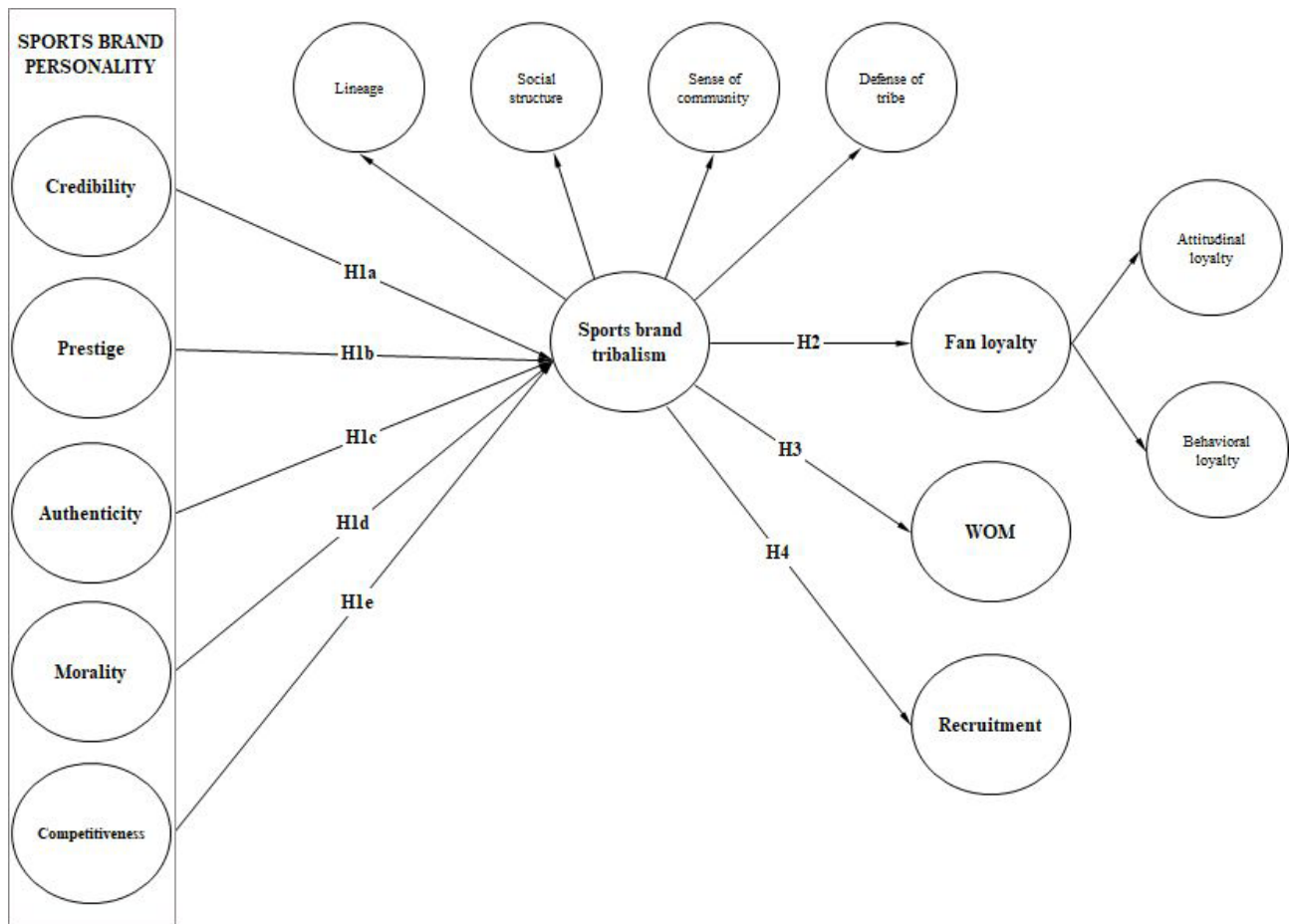


Figure 1. Theoretical model.

### 3.2 Relationship between brand personality dimensions and tribalism

Previous literature has examined the relationship between brand personality and tribalism (Tsiotsou and Veloutsou, 2011; Aji and Muslichah, 2023). Tsiotsou and Veloutsou (2011) found the existence of a direct and significant relationship between brand personality and one of the tribalism dimensions of Veloutsou and Moutinho's (2009) model, collective memory. Similarly, Aji and Muslichah (2023) found that the ability of brand personality to express the consumer's identity (i.e., self-expressive brand value) positively influences brand tribalism. Choi and Yang (2020) also found that brand trust, analogous to brand prestige and authenticity, positively influences brand tribalism.

To generate benefits for the company, the brand personality and the consumer's personality - both the real self and the ideal self - must be congruent (Roy et al., 2021). In addition, if this congruence is achieved, the

consumer will exhibit better attitudinal, behavioral, and affective responses (Aji and Muslichah, 2023), and an emotional bond can be created between the consumer and the brand. This connection can be fundamental to the formation of brand tribes (Sierra et al., 2022).

The congruence of brand and individual personalities forms part of Veloutsou and Moutinho's (2009) tribalism construct, which includes a dimension they call the degree of fit with (the consumer's) lifestyle. This relates to how much the individual perceives that the brand fits his or her personality (Sierra et al., 2022). These points suggest that it is logical to conclude that some brand personalities are more congruent with the personalities of tribal individuals. This congruence can help create an emotional relationship between the brand and the consumer (Goncalves Filho et al., 2022; Sierra et al., 2022). Subsequently, this new emotional relationship can, in turn, foster the development of consumer-consumer relationships, underpinned by their shared passion for the brand (Japutra et al., 2023).

If we specify the level of each of the dimensions of sports brand personality, we can state that each one of them should positively influence brand tribalism. First, if the consumer perceives that the sports brand has high credibility, he or she will feel motivated to align him or herself with it and the rest of the tribe members (Rather et al., 2022) and defend it from negative attacks (Roy et al., 2021). Thus:

H1a: The credibility of a sports organization's brand personality has a direct and positive influence on brand tribalism.

Second, if the brand is perceived as prestigious, as a reference among the sports teams in its environment, it also becomes an excellent raw material for the consumer to generate states of identification with it (Yoshida et al., 2021), since it allows him or her to improve his or her self-concept by satisfying self-definitional needs (Currás-Pérez et al, 2009). Thus, the individual feels motivated to align with the group and create a sense of community with the rest of the brand followers as a mechanism to improve his or her self-concept. Thus:

H1b: The prestige of a sports organization's brand personality has a direct and positive influence on brand tribalism.

Similarly, if the sports brand is perceived as more authentic, with a history but open to new ideas and change, this will enhance brand tribalism. Kucharska et al. (2020) showed that if the personal brand of a soccer player is perceived as authentic, the desire of followers to align and identify with him or her increases. Therefore, we suggest:

H1c: The authenticity of a sports organization's brand personality has a direct and positive influence on brand tribalism.

The morality dimension refers to the fact that the sports brand follows ethical standards (e.g., codes of conduct), promotes values, and supports social causes. Previous research suggests that if subjects perceive that the sports brand personality has high morality, they will more easily align with the brand, tend to defend it, and create a sense of community with its followers (Aljarah et al., 2022). Thus:

H1d: The morality of a sports organization's brand personality has a direct and positive influence on brand tribalism.

Finally, a sports brand's competitiveness (i.e., the degree to which the team has sporting success or fights and instills a sense of pride in its fans) should also be a brand personality dimension that enhances tribalism.

Carlson et al. (2009) showed that success (analogous to competitiveness) is a dimension of sports brand personality that predicts the fan's identification with the team because it can enhance the club's social prestige. Thus, sporting success and pride in supporting a team are expected to act as glue that makes fans feel more aligned with the team and creates a greater sense of community with other fans. Thus:

H1e: The competitiveness of a sports organization's brand personality has a direct and positive influence on brand tribalism.

### 3.3 Behavioral consequences of tribalism: fan loyalty, WOM, and recruitment

Previous research on tribalism in sports organizations has examined the direct relationship between brand tribalism and fan loyalty in traversal causal/quantitative studies (Jeong et al., 2020; Sierra and Taute, 2019; Goncalves Filho et al., 2022). The results mainly showed the existence of a significant relationship, both direct and indirect, between brand tribalism and loyalty (Aji and Muslichah, 2023). However, not all studies have obtained conclusive results.

Meir (2009), in a study of rugby fans, found that the only variable that had a direct, significant influence on loyalty was tribalism, and this effect was relatively weak. Tsiotsou (2013), in the context of soccer fans in a southern European country, identified a series of effects on brand-consumer relationships, which in turn affected fan loyalty. The results showed an indirect relationship between certain tribal behaviors - collective memory and commitment - and loyalty, and that intentions to participate in future tribal activities had a direct, positive effect on fan loyalty.

We propose that if tribes revolve around a specific sports organization's brand, and consumption is sometimes an essential condition of community membership and an element of identification with and expression of the tribe, it seems logical to conclude that tribalism will have a positive influence on fan loyalty. This will be especially true if fan loyalty is conceptualized as a construct with both attitudinal and behavioral dimensions, as in this research. Brand tribes will not only be able to enhance the fans' behavioral intentions to maintain a relationship with the sports brand over time, but will also affect the attitudes or affective responses that motivate this behavior. Thus:

H2. Brand tribalism directly and positively influences fans' loyalty to their favorite sports organization.

The relationship between brand tribalism and the intention to speak positively about a brand has also received attention in the previous literature (Badrinarayanan et al., 2014; Ruane and Wallace, 2015; Jeong et al., 2020; Goncalves Filho et al., 2022). Badrinarayanan et al. (2014), in the context of online role-playing games, found the existence of a direct and significant relationship between brand tribalism and positive WOM. Ruane and Wallace (2015), in a study of self-expressive brands, identified a significant but inverse relationship between the two. As with loyalty, the authors attributed this finding to the fact that loyalty - and therefore positive WOM - is directed towards the community, not to the brand. Finally, Jeong et al. (2020) found that four dimensions of brand tribalism (i.e., segmental lineage, social structure, defense, and sense of community) positively influenced consumers' behavioral intentions.

Consumers today are more influenced by the opinions of other consumers than by brand characteristics. If we accept the premise that the consumption of a particular brand is a condition for membership in a brand tribe (Ruane and Wallace, 2015), it seems logical to conclude that tribal fans will explicitly transmit positive brand-related information about sports organizations. Thus:

H3. Tribalism directly and positively influences the intention of fans to speak positively about their sports organization to others (WOM).

Finally, we propose that highly committed fans adopt leadership roles, become active recruiters of new fans (Utami et al., 2022), and act as community spokespersons to defend the sports organization's brand against competitors (Roy et al., 2023). Previous research has shown that a strong brand attachment triggers a mechanism that motivates consumers to badmouth competing brands (i.e., external trash-talking) in an attempt to attract others to their favorite brand (Japutra et al., 2022). On the basis that sports fans show high involvement, motivated by the desire to confirm their sense of identity, it would seem logical to conclude that highly committed - tribe members of a sports organization will encourage others to support their team (Jeong et al., 2020). Thus:

H4. Tribalism directly and positively influences fans' behavior in terms of recruiting new fans to support their favorite sports organization.

## 4 Methodology

### 4.1 Sample and design

A quantitative empirical study based on an online survey was carried out to estimate the theoretical model and address the hypotheses. The tribal behavior analyzed was that of fans of Spanish professional soccer teams. LaLiga Santander (the commercial brand of the Spanish professional soccer league) is a competition between the top 20 professional soccer clubs.

The sampling procedure was based on a combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling. There were no age or sex restrictions, but there was an attitudinal criterion: only individuals who considered themselves soccer fans were asked to answer the questionnaire. This was disseminated in collaboration with first division (LaLiga) teams and opinion leaders (sports journalists), who distributed the questionnaire in forums and official profiles on social networks. The final sample size was 1662 subjects (See: Supplementary Material: Supplementary Data 1 – Database1; Supplementary Data 2 – Database2 and Supplementary Data 3 – Database3). Table 1 shows the socio-demographic characteristics of the sample. According to data from Statista (2019), the average age of soccer fans in Spain is 38 years old; in addition, 7% of women attend soccer stadiums every week. Thus, the final sample fits quite well with the representation of soccer fans in Spain, based on sex and age.

### 4.2 Measures

All scales used in the present study were adapted from scales previously used in the academic literature. The responses were recorded on 7-point Likert-type scales (from 1: strongly disagree to 7: strongly agree). Supplementary Data 8 – Questionnaire, provides details of the scales. First, as previously explained, this research uses the conceptualization of brand tribalism adopted by Taute and Sierra (2014), who regarded the construct as a second-order factor reflecting its four dimensions: lineage (3 items), social structure (3 items), defense of the tribe (5 items), and sense of community (5 items). Second, we use the brand personality scale developed by Tsiotsou (2012) for specific sporting entities, which distinguishes five dimensions: competitiveness (5 items), prestige (5 items), morality (3 items), authenticity (3 items), and credibility (3 items).

**Table 1**  
**Sample description**

Characteristic		% (n=1662)
Sex	Man	93.5
	Woman	6.5
Age	<18	2.3
	18-35	45.8
	35-65	50.1
	>65	1.8
Educational level	No studies	0
	Primary school	6.2
	Secondary school	35.4
	University	42.0
Occupation	Master's/Doctorate	16.2
	Student	15.9
	Self-employed	16.4
	Employee	56.8
	Unemployed	7.3
Income level (monthly)	Retired/pensioner	3.5
	Less than 600 euros	4.1
	Between 600 and 1,000 euros	7.9
	Between 1,001 and 2,000 euros	30.4
	Between 2,001 and 3000 euros	22.6
Link to a favorite club	Above 3,000 euros	16.8
	Information unavailable	18.2
	Member/subscriber and member of a supporters' club	19.9
I watch my team's matches....	Member/subscriber	57.6
	Fan only	22.5
	At the stadium	37.2
	On TV/the Internet	56.6
	I don't watch them	6.2

To measure fan loyalty, the present study uses the scale designed by Tsiotsou (2013) specifically for the sports context, which conceptualizes this consumer response as a second-order reflective factor composed of two dimensions, behavioral loyalty (7 items) and attitude (2 items). To measure WOM, the study uses Maxham and Netemeyer's (2002) proposal, a one-dimensional 3-item scale. Finally, recruitment was measured using Badrinarayanan et al.'s (2014) 3-item scale.

**4.3 Psychometric properties of the measurement model**

We estimated the theoretical structure of the model using the "repeated indicator approach" (Lohmöller, 1989) of the partial least squares (i.e., PLS) algorithm.

The parameters were estimated using Smart-PLS 3.0 (Ringle et al., 2015), and 5000 samples were bootstrapped to calculate the significance of the parameters (see Table 2). PLS-SEM was chosen as the estimation option as our model is formed by a complex structural model with many constructs, indicators, and model relationships (Hair et al., 2019). The scale depuration process eliminated 5 items (cred1, cred3, pres4, auten1, auten2, beh.loy2 and beh.loy7). The composite reliability of all constructs exceeded the recommended value of 0.60 (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988). The average variance extracted (AVE) of all constructs exceeded 0.50 (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994). As evidence of convergent validity, the CFA indicated that all items were significantly ( $p < 0.01$ ) related to their factors (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Table 2 also shows the mean loadings of each factor on its dimensions, all of which exceed the convergent validity criteria. For replications, see Supplementary Data 4 – PLS model estimations step 1, Supplementary Data 5 – PLS model estimations step 1 configurations, Supplementary Data 6 – PLS model estimations step 2 and Supplementary Data 7 – PLS model estimations step 2 configurations.

The discriminant validity of the measurement model was confirmed by the Fornell and Larcker criterion (1981), since the square roots of the AVEs are greater than the inter-construct correlations (see Table 3, below the diagonal). An analysis of the heterotrait-monotrait ratio (see Table 3, above the diagonal) also indicates that the measurement model has discriminant validity.

Finally, common method bias (i.e., CMB) could be a problem in this type of study (Kock et al., 2021). We used some a priori strategies to avoid potential CMB problems. First, we checked that the items on the scales did not contain vague and unfamiliar terminology, we asked respondents to answer as honestly as possible (e.g., "there are no right or wrong answers"), and we ensured the anonymity and confidentiality of the study (Kock et al., 2021). Second, we performed Harman's single-factor test. The exploratory factor analysis with all the indicators resulted in one factor explaining 29.19% of the variance, which is lower than the 50% threshold suggested by Podsakoff et al. (2003).

**5 Results and discussion**

Table 4 shows the results of the hypotheses testing. The values of the standardized coefficients for each structural relationship and the significance levels of the associated *t* statistics are shown. Figure 2 graphically depicts the measurement of the model.





Table 2  
**Reliability and convergent validity of the measurement instrument**

First order factors	Item	Standardized loadings	t value (bootstrapping)	rho_A	CR	AVE
Authenticity	auten3	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Competitiveness	comp1	.65	22.53**	.89	.87	.57
	comp2	.82	61.03**			
	comp3	.81	49.78**			
	comp4	.82	64.14**			
	comp5	.62	20.43**			
Credibility	cred2	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Morality	moral1	.88	92.37**	.80	.88	.71
	moral2	.78	53.29**			
	moral3	.86	78.23**			
Prestige	pres1	.51	13.89**	.84	.82	.55
	pres2	.87	83.74**			
	pres3	.81	55.95**			
	pres5	.73	32.34**			
Recruitment	rec1	.90	120.20**	.82	.88	.71
	rec2	.68	31.34**			
	rec3	.93	173.14**			
Word-of-mouth	wom1	.85	62.35**	.87	.92	.79
	wom2	.91	99.75**			
	wom3	.90	95.56**			
Defense of the tribe	def1	.70	44.56**	.76	.83	.50
	def2	.71	43.01**			
	def3	.58	21.41**			
	def4	.80	71.94**			
	def5	.74	47.25**			
Social structure	soc1	.90	131.29**	.81	.89	.72
	soc2	.76	52.69**			
	soc3	.89	124.41**			
Sense of community	com1	.70	42.80**	.82	.87	.57
	com2	.78	51.61**			
	com3	.75	37.18**			
	com4	.70	31.43**			
	com5	.83	69.01**			
Linkage	link1	.86	84.67**	.82	.89	.73
	link2	.88	101.12**			
	link3	.82	69.75**			
Behavioral loyalty	beh.loy1	.69	25.32**	.81	.86	.55
	beh.loy3	.82	84.67**			
	beh.loy4	.86	71.12**			
	beh.loy5	.74	34.26**			
	beh.loy6	.55	22.65**			
Attitudinal loyalty	att.loy1	.86	83.84**	.59	.83	.71
	att.loy2	.83	54.59**			
<b>Second-order factors</b>						
Tribalism	Defense of the tribe	.92	203.77**	.91	.93	.76
	Social structure	.85	96.06**			
	Sense of community	.88	134.73**			
	Linkage	.85	84.52**			
Loyalty	Behavioral	.95	250.46**	.88	.94	.89
	Attitudinal	.94	180.01**			

N/A: Single item latent variable, does not apply. Note: rho\_A=Dijkstra-Henseler rho; CR=composite reliability; AVE=average variance extracted.  
 \*\*p<0.0

**Table 3**  
**Discriminant validity of the measurement model**

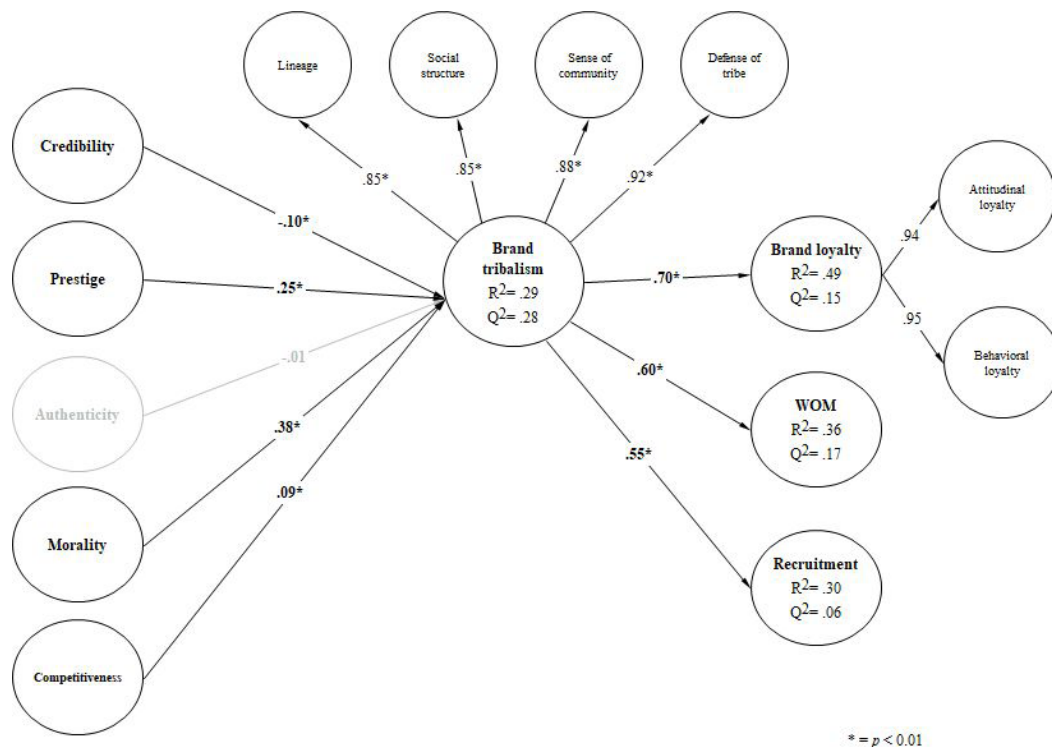
Factor	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	F7	F8	F9
F1. Authenticity	<b>1.00</b>	0.38	0.09	0.20	0.45	0.17	0.16	0.22	0.20
F2. Competitiveness	0.36	<b>0.75</b>	0.43	0.24	0.62	0.61	0.17	0.37	0.27
F3. Credibility	0.09	0.41	<b>1.00</b>	0.08	0.44	0.31	0.03	0.16	0.11
F4. Loyalty	0.19	0.27	0.07	<b>0.94</b>	0.47	0.18	0.66	0.77	0.74
F5. Morality	0.40	0.57	0.39	0.39	<b>0.84</b>	0.37	0.33	0.55	0.51
F6. Prestige	0.17	0.45	0.26	0.19	0.31	<b>0.74</b>	0.14	0.41	0.23
F7. Recruitment	0.14	0.16	0.03	0.54	0.26	0.12	<b>0.84</b>	0.64	0.68
F8. Tribalism	0.21	0.38	0.15	0.70	0.47	0.38	0.55	<b>0.87</b>	0.67
F9. WOM	0.19	0.28	0.10	0.64	0.42	0.21	0.56	0.60	<b>0.89</b>

Note: Values on the diagonal are the square root of the AVE. Lower triangle: latent variable correlations; Upper triangle: HTMT ratios.

**Table 4**  
**Hypotheses testing**

Hypotheses	Standardized beta	t value (bootstrapping)	f <sup>2</sup>	95% CI	
				2.50%	97.50%
H1a Credibility -> Tribalism	-.10**	3.85	.001	-.06	.03
H1b Prestige -> Tribalism	.25**	9.43	.047	.20	.30
H1c Authenticity -> Tribalism	-.01	.60	.031	-.15	-.05
H1d Morality -> Tribalism	.38**	13.08	.043	.33	.44
H1e Competitiveness -> Tribalism	.09**	3.10	.001	.03	.15
H2 Tribalism -> Loyalty	.70**	44.55	1.026	.67	.73
H3 Tribalism -> WOM	.60**	26.93	.580	.51	.58
H4 Tribalism -> Recruitment	.55**	29.00	.437	.56	.65

R<sup>2</sup> (Loyalty)=.49; R<sup>2</sup> (Recruitment)=.30; R<sup>2</sup> (Tribalism)=.29; R<sup>2</sup> (WOM)=.36; PLSpredict Q<sup>2</sup>: Loyalty=.15; Recruitment=.06; Tribalism=.28; WOM=.17; CI: Confidence Interval; \*\*p<0.01.



\* = p < 0.01

Figure 2. Estimated model.

### 5.1 Influence of sports brand personality dimensions on tribalism

The main theoretical contribution expected from this research is to analyze the influence of the different dimensions of sports brand personality on the configuration of brand tribes. We show how specific characteristics of the sports brand, such as morality, prestige, and competitiveness, have a positive and significant influence on the levels of tribalism of soccer fans. In contrast, the dimensions of sports brand credibility and competitiveness have a negative or non-significant influence on tribalism.

First, our results suggest that the construction of brand tribalism is a consequence of three sports brand personality traits: prestige, morality, and competitiveness. Brand prestige is the first dimension of sports brand personality that exerts a significant and positive influence on brand tribalism ( $\beta=.25$ ;  $p<.01$ ). Prestige is associated with the superiority of the team and the recognition of its sporting achievements, defined by five terms: massive, glorious, great, strong, and honorable. This brand personality dimension is first related to how well the team is supported (Liu and Schwarz, 2020). This element should positively influence the correlation with tribalism, as the more followers the team has - if the conditions are met - the greater the number of social relationships in the community, thus increasing the value of the brand bonds (Rather et al., 2022).

Second, sports brand morality also has a significant and positive influence on tribalism ( $\beta=.38$ ;  $p<.01$ ). Morality is linked to fans' perceptions of the team's ethical behavior. It consists of three elements: principles, culture, and ethics. It has been suggested that moral values and beliefs are shared in brand tribes (Cooper et al., 2005; Mitchell and Imrie, 2011), which adopt them through a learning process (Meir and Scott, 2007). Our results suggest that when fans perceive that a sports brand follows ethical standards, promotes values, and supports social causes, they align themselves with the brand, tend to defend it, and create a sense of community with other fans (Aljarah et al., 2022).

Finally, sports brand competitiveness also has a positive (albeit small) influence on brand tribalism ( $\beta=.09$ ;  $p<.01$ ). Competitiveness is associated with descriptors such as pride, determination, and effort. Some studies have shown that sporting success is an important factor in the development of brand identification (Carlson et al., 2009). It seems reasonable to conclude that teams with sporting

success, or teams that, even if they don't win, make an effort, fight, and make their fans feel proud, will be attractive brands for fans to identify with and use as a means of expressing their own identities.

Contrary to our expectations, our results show that sports brand credibility is significantly but negatively related to brand tribalism ( $\beta=-.10$ ;  $p<.01$ ). As measured, credibility is linked to the sports brand's ability to generate feelings of confidence and security (i.e., being a wealthy and financially independent organization). Our results suggest that this position of power and status, which reflects the high credibility of the sports brand, is a brand personality trait that negatively influences tribalism. One possible explanation for this result is that a powerful, influential, or wealthy club may cause its fans to feel less need to defend themselves or their public lineage, making it more difficult to create a brand tribe around these highly credible clubs.

Finally, and again contrary to our expectations, the sports brand personality dimension of authenticity did not significantly influence tribalism ( $\beta=-.01$ ;  $p>.05$ ). As measured, this dimension relates to the idea that the club is open to new ideas and change. Our results suggest that clubs without their rituals or a distinctive history, customs, or value system (Cova and Pace, 2006) have difficulty generating feelings of lineage, defense, or a sense of community among their fans.

Based on the above analysis, we can determine whether credibility and authenticity (both of which have been shown to have negative or non-significant relationships with brand tribalism) are linked to wealth, media exposure, or club innovativeness. These characteristics are normally associated with teams with a strong financial situation, which allows them to acquire better players, for example, a fact that usually underpins sporting success. Our results, however, indicate that this "money-based" construction of brand tribalism does not work well.

On the contrary, the brand's morality is the personality trait that has the greatest impact on its fans' level of tribalism. Tribalism involves important social relationships for community members, so the constituent elements of their membership go beyond the team's wealth and media exposure. People can associate themselves with clubs and build their relationships on more important personal foundations (ethics, values) (Tsiotsou, 2013). Prestige and competitiveness associated with sporting successes, or at least the perception of effort and struggle to achieve sporting success, are also predictors of brand tribalism.

### 5.2 Consequences of brand tribalism in sports organizations

The results of the present study show that brand tribalism has a positive and significant impact on fans' loyalty. The relationship between tribalism and loyalty is the strongest of the effects proposed in the model's hypotheses ( $\beta=.70$ ;  $p<.01$ ). This suggests that tribalism has a broader and more intense impact on fan loyalty than proposed in any previous study (Goncalves Filho et al., 2022); i.e., they show that loyalty has a positive, significant relationship with the tribalism construct measured as a whole and not just through one of its dimensions as in other loyalty-focused studies.

Second, the results of the present study reveal that brand tribalism has a positive and statistically significant influence on word-of-mouth; the more tribal a person is, the greater his or her propensity will be to speak positively about the club he or she claims to supports. In addition, it is important to note that the effect of brand tribalism on WOM was strong ( $\beta=.60$ ;  $p<.01$ ). Based on the fact that tribes share emotions (Cova and Cova, 2002), it seems logical to conclude that in their word-of-mouth communications, group members will want to share with other members the emotions they have lived through their experiences with the brand and the community. Moreover, community members develop feelings of mutual moral obligation (Taute and Sierra, 2014).

Thus, it is to be expected that some word-of-mouth communications will provide useful advice to other community members.

Having analyzed the role (and characteristics) of word-of-mouth in the tribe, it is advisable to analyze whether community members might go a step further, i.e., not only recommend the product/service, but also take an active role in attracting new fans. The results obtained in the present study revealed the existence of a positive and significant relationship between brand tribalism and new fan recruitment. In other words, fan team members play an active role in attracting and recruiting new followers. It should also be noted that the effect exerted was high ( $\beta=.55$ ;  $p<.01$ ).

### 5.3 Mediation analysis

Finally, we proceeded to estimate a new model that includes the possible direct effects of the brand personality dimensions on the behavioral outcomes to analyze the mediating role of brand tribalism in this relationship. Table 5 shows the results of this analysis. As can be seen, with the exception of the authenticity dimension (which does not exert a significant direct or indirect influence), brand tribalism fully or partially mediates the relationship between brand personality dimensions and fans' behavioral responses in the remaining dimensions. These results confirm the main logic of our model: brand personality dimensions influence brand tribalism, and through it, fan behaviors.

Table 5  
Mediation analysis of brand tribalism

Relationship	Direct effect before introducing mediator	Indirect effect	Direct effect after introducing mediator	Mediation
Credibility -> Loyalty	-.13**	.07**	-.05*	Partial
Credibility -> Recruitment	-.10**	.06**	-.04	Full
Credibility -> WOM	-.11**	.05**	-.05*	Partial
Prestige -> Loyalty	.08**	.17**	-.10**	Partial
Prestige -> Recruitment	.06*	.14**	-.09**	Partial
Prestige -> WOM	.10**	.13**	-.04	Yes
Authenticity -> Loyalty	.01	-.01	.02	
Authenticity -> Recruitment	.03	-.01	.04	
Authenticity -> WOM	.00	-.01	.01	
Morality -> Loyalty	.37**	.26**	.11**	Partial
Morality -> Recruitment	.26**	.22**	.04	Full
Morality -> WOM	.39**	.20**	.20**	Partial
Competitiveness -> Loyalty	.08*	.07**	.01	Full
Competitiveness -> Recruitment	.01	.06**	-.05	Full
Competitiveness -> WOM	.06	.05**	.01	Full

WOM: Word of Mouth; \*\* $p<0.01$ ; \* $p<0.05$ .





## 6 Conclusions, implications, and limitations

### 6.1 Conclusions

The results confirm that soccer club managers should pursue strategies that facilitate the formation of brand personalities that increase the likelihood of fans joining the tribe (Lee et al., 2021). To achieve this, managers must address all the constituent elements of brand personality. We conclude that tribes linked to professional soccer clubs value a brand that is moral, prestigious, and competitive much more than one associated with wealth and authenticity. This suggests that this type of community bases its relationships on the tribe's contribution to the essence and way of being - the self - of its members, rather than on issues they consider more superfluous, such as wealth or innovativeness (Lee et al., 2021; Walker and Kent, 2009).

Finally, it can be concluded that brand tribalism has a significant and very intense impact on soccer fans' loyalty (Goncalves Filho et al., 2022). That is, most tribal fans will be more loyal to the brand. Therefore, it can be argued that brand tribalism has a significant influence on community members' repurchase decisions, attitudes toward brands, and future purchase intentions (Sierra and Taute 2019). In addition, the results of this research revealed that brand tribalism has a direct, significant, and intense impact on WOM and the recruitment of new fans. That is, the more tribal the person is, the more likely he or she will be to speak well of the club he or she claims to support and to take an active role in recruiting new supporters.

### 6.2 Managerial implications

The sports brand personality dimension that exerts the strongest influence on brand tribalism is morality. Therefore, it would be appropriate for the company to develop a code of conduct that applies to all personnel. This code should be consistent with the moral criteria of the wider society and include tolerance and respect for, and the proper treatment of, other people (Walker and Kent, 2009). This type of initiative could increase the respect fans have for the club. Furthermore, the club should deal harshly with unethical behavior by members of its tribe (e.g., violent acts by hooligans), as it can negatively affect the morality of the sports brand. Another way to demonstrate morality would be to develop a culture of social responsibility and cooperation with social causes (Lee et al., 2021), preferably causes related to the tribe and its environment.

In this way, the company will be able to demonstrate its commitment to the wider community (Walker and Kent, 2009).

Second, prestige and competitiveness also exert a positive influence on brand tribalism, but credibility and authenticity do not. In promotional campaigns, brand managers need to rejoice in their sporting successes, but they must also underline the team's effort and struggle in moments of defeat. Elements that underline the power, wealth, or innovativeness of the club are not relevant to creating brand tribalism.

Third, with regard to the consequences of brand tribalism, the sports club should organize activities (outside of matches) aimed at allowing supporters to meet and strengthen their tribal ties, thus improving cohesion and unity among fans. The club must take care of the elements that act as glue for the tribe, for example, symbols (e.g., a shield) and anchoring places (e.g., stadiums or places of celebration), and collaborate with the supporters in the development of rituals (e.g., anthems or rites of celebration). In this way, the club will become part of the tribe's subculture and act as its promoter.

Finally, the special attention that sports club managers should pay to the three dimensions of brand personality that significantly influence tribalism (e.g., morality, prestige, and competitiveness) should also be transferred as criteria for choosing the commercial brands with which to establish alliances in the sponsorship strategy. As there is a process of transferring image associations between the sponsor and the sports brand (Meenaghan, 2001), it is important to evaluate whether the commercial brand is perceived as prestigious and socially responsible (e.g., moral), so that these dimensions of the club's brand personality could be enhanced through the sponsorship program, thus improving the conditions for a greater sense of tribalism among its fans.

### 6.3 Limitations and future research lines

The results and conclusions of this empirical study should be viewed in the context of its limitations. First, it should be noted that the study only examined the field of sport, more specifically, soccer. This context has aspects that differentiate it from other business sectors. Therefore, some of the conclusions drawn in this study may not apply in the same way in all contexts. It would be interesting to replicate the study in other areas of activity and other sports.

Finally, it should also be noted that the study context (soccer clubs) provided a sample composed mostly of men.

For this reason, it would be interesting to replicate the study with a sample composed mostly of women; this would help determine whether there are significant differences in tribal behaviors based on the gender of community members.

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## SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

Supplementary material accompanies this paper.

Supplementary Data 1 – Database1

Supplementary Data 2 – Database2

Supplementary Data 3 – Database3

Supplementary Data 4 – PLS model estimations step 1

Supplementary Data 5 – PLS model estimations step 1 configurations

Supplementary Data 6 – PLS model estimations step 2

Supplementary Data 7 – PLS model estimations step 2 configurations

Supplementary Data 8 – Questionnaire

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