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## Unveiling the emotional edge: how fans' emotional attachment influences the relationships between fanship, fandom, subjective well-being, and attitudinal loyalty --Manuscript Draft--

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<b>Abstract:</b>	Emotions are hallmarks of more internalised and meaningful sport fan identities (Funk & James, 2001; 2006). Building on this premise, we adopt the social identity approach to explore how fans' emotional attachment affects the relationships between fanship (i.e., personal identification with a team), fandom (i.e., identification with fellow fans), subjective well-being (SWB), and attitudinal loyalty. We used structural equation modelling to analyse data from fans (N=571) of two Italian Serie A football teams. Results highlighted a positive association between fandom and SWB. SWB positively mediated the relationship between fandom and attitudinal loyalty. Moreover, emotional attachment negatively moderated the relationships between fanship and SWB, and between fandom and attitudinal loyalty. The results indicated that high identifiers feeling strong emotional attachment to the team displayed lower SWB and attitudinal loyalty toward the team. Practitioners and organisations may benefit from implementing initiatives and programs addressing the side effects of fans' emotions.

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### **Abstract**

Emotions are hallmarks of more internalised and meaningful sport fan identities (Funk & James, 2001; 2006). Building on this premise, we use the social identity approach to explore how fans' emotional attachment affects the relationships between fanship (i.e., personal identification with a team), fandom (i.e., social identification with fellow fans), subjective well-being (SWB), and attitudinal loyalty. We used structural equation modelling to analyse data from fans ( $N=571$ ) of two Italian Serie A association football teams. Results highlighted a positive association between fandom and SWB. SWB positively mediated the relationship between fandom and attitudinal loyalty. Moreover, emotional attachment negatively moderated the relationships between fanship and SWB, and between fandom and attitudinal loyalty. These results indicated that high identifiers feeling strong emotional attachment to the team displayed lower SWB and attitudinal loyalty toward the team. Practitioners and organisations may benefit from implementing initiatives and programs addressing the side effects of fans' emotions.

**Keywords:** social identity approach, emotional attachment, fanship, fandom, well-being, football fans

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Team identification has received consistent academic attention in sport management and marketing over the last thirty years (Lock & Heere, 2017). The psychological connection between sports fans and various features of their team (e.g., logo, stadium, athletes) has been investigated in terms of brand profitability (Matsuoka et al., 2003), consumer loyalty (Bodet & Bernache-Assollant, 2011), stadium attendance (Wakefield & Sloan, 1995), and fans' well-being (Inoue et al., 2017; Reysen et al., 2022b; Wann, 2006). However, in prior work, team identification has been primarily operationalised as the relationship between fans and their team. In line with the social identity approach (SIA), it appears well founded to distinguish between fans' personal connection to their beloved team/club (fanship) and their social connection with other fans and the broader community (fandom) (Gordon et al., 2021; Yoshida et al., 2015a, 2015b, 2015c; Reysen et al., 2022a, 2022b; Reysen & Branscombe, 2010).

According to the SIA, identities have an emotional dimension, which consists of identity-oriented affective values and meanings (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Although the role of discrete and group-based emotions in individuals' identification with a team is well established (Campo et al., 2019; Gordon et al., 2021; Prayag et al., 2020), there is a lack of understanding about how individual emotional attachment to a team may interact with the personal and social identification processes of fans (Dwyer et al., 2015). To fill this research gap, we propose that emotional attachment is a distinct, yet complementary, construct that interacts with identification (Sen et al., 2015). Tajfel (1982) argued that social identification consists of cognitive and evaluative components, while emotion emerges as group membership internalises in self (Tajfel, 1982). In turn, emotional attachment relates to consumers' affective bond with an organisation (Prayag et al., 2020; Sen et al., 2015).

Considering the complementarity of identification and emotional attachment as variables, capturing consumer-organisation relationships can facilitate a better understanding of the identification process from an emotional perspective. Furthermore, individual-level emotional attachment to a team has been proposed to interact with fans' identification processes (Dwyer et al., 2015). However, the dynamics of these relationships are under researched.

Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to investigate the interactions between sport fans' emotional attachment and two forms of identification: fanship and fandom. More specifically, we aim to understand (i) the effects of fanship and fandom on fans' subjective well-being (SWB) and attitudinal loyalty to the team, and (ii) how emotional attachment moderates these effects. To fulfill our aim, we analysed data from fans of two Italian Serie A teams—S.S. Lazio and A.S. Roma. Contrary to expectations, we found that high identifiers (either with the team or its fan community) with greater emotional attachment might experience detrimental side effects. Moreover, we extend the SIA to health and well-being (Haslam et al., 2009; Inoue et al., 2022; Jetten et al., 2014, 2017) by revealing that enhancements in SWB through fandom influence the relationship between social identification and fans' loyalty. From a practical standpoint, this research emphasises the importance of recognising fans as emotional stakeholders and paying strategic attention to the connection between attachment and well-being. Based on our results, clubs may consider supporting positive peer-led initiatives aimed at raising awareness among fans about emotional regulation, promoting mental health resources, and creating supportive environments to strengthen fans' loyalty and engagement.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **The social identity approach**

The distinction and interacting dynamics between personal and social identities are one of the foundational propositions of the SIA (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Tajfel & Turner,

1979). From this perspective, individuals are driven to achieve a positive self-concept, derived from personal and social identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Personal identities relate to individualistic aspects of self that are unrelated to other people or groups. On the other hand, social identities reflect an aspirational process through which individuals actively select social groups as definitions of their self-concept. Thus, the repertoire of individuals' personal and social identities coalesce to form a broader picture of their self-concept (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

The SIA combines social identity and self-categorisation theories (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Ashmore & Jussim, 1997; Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), both of which emerged from the interactionist tradition in social psychology (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). According to the SIA, groups—like team fanbases or communities—exist because two or more individuals perceive themselves to (a) be members of the same collective, (b) share a common social identity, and (c) feel interchangeable with fellow members of the collective (Turner et al., 1987). This process of *self-categorisation* makes shared identity possible for members (Turner et al., 1987). When salient, members compare social identities with salient out-groups. Through a process of intergroup social comparison, distinctive features of the in-group are evaluated in relation to what makes 'us' meaningfully different to rivals. Group membership enhances individuals' self-distinctiveness appeals and is reinforced through specific activities (e.g., group participation) and processes (e.g., identity maintenance strategies). Shared identities within groups facilitate the process of social identification characterised by three components: cognitive realisation, evaluation, and—when identities are perceived as meaningful—emotional significance (Tajfel, 1982).

### **The SIA, fanship and fandom**

In sport fan research, the measurement of team identification has been a central topic of debate due to the complexity and multidimensionality of the construct. Team

identification, defined as the psychological connection fans feel toward their sports team, can encompass emotional attachment, cognitive involvement, and behavioural expressions (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Traditional approaches to measuring team identification often rely on unidimensional scales that focus primarily on self-reported affective loyalty or behavioural engagement, which may not capture the broader psychological and social dynamics underlying the construct (Fink, Trail, & Anderson, 2002). Furthermore, different cultural and contextual factors can influence how identification manifests, making it difficult to apply standardised metrics across diverse fan bases or sports (Lock et al., 2012).

One commonly used measure of team identification is the Sport Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS) developed by Wann and Branscombe (1993), which focuses primarily on emotional attachment and behavioural outcomes, such as game attendance and fan loyalty. While effective for measuring the degree of team identification, the SSIS is limited in its ability to capture the social dimensions of identification and the broader social-psychological processes underlying fan behaviours (Lock & Heere, 2017).

The Team Identification Index (TII; Trail & James, 2001) expanded on these ideas. Yet, while drawing from social identity theory, the scale appears to focus on the role of fans (Lock & Heere, 2017), which is out of the scope of this study. Similarly, the Team\*ID Scale (Heere & James, 2007) was designed to incorporate both personal and social identity components, acknowledging that team identification is not only an internal process but also shaped by external, social interactions. Although the Team\*ID index is a comprehensive measure of different dimensions of team identification, it is informed by four different theories (see Ashmore et al. 2004 for a detailed explication of the approach Heere et al., 2007, drew from).

The Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) proposed by Funk and James (2001) offers another approach, proposing that attitude development is a dynamic, evolving process.

The PCM has been operationalised using a three-dimensional scale of involvement (i.e., pleasure, sign, and centrality; Beaton et al., 2009), which is used to categorise participants into four stages: (a) awareness, (b) attraction, (c) attachment, and (d) allegiance. This model categorises participants into the attachment and allegiance categories in which Funk and James (2001; 2006) argue social identification is internalised in the self-concept.

Researchers have employed the SIA as a theoretical framework to explore distinct influences of fans' personal and social identities. Notably, Reysen and Branscombe (2010) distinguished between fanship and fandom (Reysen et al., 2017a, 2022a, 2022b). Based on a traditionalistic understanding of team identification, *fanship* is defined as “the extent that a fan feels psychologically connected to a team” (Wann, 1996, p.331). Conversely, *fandom* refers to the connection people establish with the broader fan group. It mirrors “that part of the individuals' self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group/s together with the value and emotional significance of that membership” (Tajfel, 1981, p. 255). In more simplistic terms, fanship refers to an individual connection to a team or club (i.e., personal identity), and fandom captures one's sense of fellowship with other fans and the broader community of the team (i.e., social identity) (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010).

Fanship mirrors Wann's (1996) conceptualisation of team identification. As such, it is a highly researched construct, as mentioned previously (Delia & James, 2018; Inoue et al, 2015, 2017, 2022; Lock et al., 2012; Lock & Heere, 2017). For example, Lock and colleagues (2012) demonstrated that identification with a team is an evolving process moving from external motivation to internalised commitment, shaped by direct experiences, player recognition, media engagement, and advocacy—each reinforcing personal and social alignment with the team. On the contrary, social identification with the broader fan community has been explored less frequently. Yoshida and colleagues (2015a) found a

positive influence of fan community identification on team brand value and several community-related outcomes, such as active engagement, personalised product adoption, a sense of member duty, and favourable word-of-mouth promotion. Different forms of pride were also found to have positive direct and indirect (through prestige and distinctiveness dimensions) effects on team and fan community identification and related processes (Gordon et al., 2021). Researchers have used a range of labels for the connection between fans, including: fan community identity (Gordon et al., 2021; Yoshida et al. 2015a, 2015b), sense of community (Yoshida et al., 2018), fan community attachment (Yoshida et al., 2015c), and fandom (Reysen et al., 2017a, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c; Reysen & Branscombe, 2010). For consistency with Reysen's work, we use the label 'fandom' to refer to individuals' social identification with their team's fan community.

Adopting social identity theory, Reysen and Branscombe (2010) compared samples of fans with various interests, which included: sport, music, media, and hobbies. They developed a new measure of fanship, finding a correlation between fanship and fandom in each context. Moreover, through a principal components analysis, Reysen and Branscombe tested the distinction between fanship and fandom, observing that items in their measures fitted adequately in two distinct factors representing fanship and fandom (in Study 4). The strength of the association between fandom and fanship led Plante et al. (2020) to explore the distinctiveness of the two constructs; they found that fanship tends to be more positively associated with measures of elitism than fandom.

Other studies have investigated the associations that fanship and fandom have with fans' well-being (e.g., psychological, self-esteem, happiness), providing equivocal results (Reysen et al., 2017, 2022a, 2022b; Reysen & Branscombe, 2010). While Reysen and Branscombe (2010) found that fanship and fandom were positively correlated with happiness, Reysen et al. (2022b) more recently found only fandom to display a significant association

with well-being through the mediation of friendship volume (in Study 1) and participation in social activities (in Studies 2 & 3). Furthermore, research highlighted that experiencing eudaimonic values while watching sport events may not directly influence overall well-being (Kim et al., 2017). Yet, the impact varied depending on one's level of sport fanship: Individuals with higher levels of fanship experienced greater fulfillment of eudaimonic needs and stronger well-being effects (Kim et al., 2017).

Focusing on the importance of a specific identity in the self-concept, Shuv-Ami and Toder Alon (2023) conceptualised and validated the Fan Social–Personal Identity Saliency (FSPIS) scale based on the SIA. The FSPIS captures the mixed and simultaneous magnitudes of personal and social identity strength. Shuv-Ami and Toder Alon (2023) found a moderate correlation between personal and social identification, highlighting a statistically significant relationship between the two constructs. In the context of professional Israeli football, Toder Alon et al. (2022) investigated the discrepancies between personal and social identification strength in predicting positive and negative aspects of being a fan. Their findings underlined that social identity strength was indicative of positive (e.g. loyalty) and negative outcomes (e.g. perception of fan aggression appropriateness), while personal identity strength was associated with less negative acts (Toder Alon et al., 2022).

In sum, the literature indicates that fanship and fandom are correlated, but they capture different aspects of fans' identification with sporting teams. Since traditional team identification research does not distinguish between fanship and fandom, Reysen et al.' approach (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010; Reysen et al., 2022a; 2022b) to conceptualising fanship and fandom is particularly well-suited for capturing and researching the related complexity of these forms of identification. Unlike other approaches, this recognises that identification is not solely an emotional or cognitive process but also shaped by social belonging and the fan's role within a community. This social aspect makes the theoretical

approach applicable across different sports and fan cultures. By incorporating the SIA, it is possible to capture the nuanced ways in which fans derive meaning from their psychological connection with a team and fan community. Accordingly, we explore the association between these two constructs in hypothesis 1:

**H1:** Fanship and fandom are two distinct yet correlated constructs.

### **The associations between fanship, fandom and subjective well-being**

Figure 1 depicts the hypothesised structural relationships that build on the proposition that fanship and fandom are distinct constructs. Specifically, we define fanship as personal identification with a team, and fandom as in-group membership and social interconnectedness. In addition, we define SWB as “people’s evaluations of their lives—evaluations that are both affective and cognitive” (Diener 2000, p.34), capturing hedonic, eudaimonic and social domains (Lui & Fernando, 2018).

Building on these definitions, we explain the link between fanship, fandom, and SWB based on the SIA to health and well-being (Haslam et al., 2009; Inoue et al., 2022; Jetten et al., 2014, 2017). There is evidence that when a social identity is internalised and meaningful in a person’s self-concept, group membership provides individuals with self-esteem enhancement, purpose in life, control, and efficacy (Jetten et al., 2017). Moreover, Haslam et al. (2009) argued that salient social identities can help people gain access to coping resources in the face of mental or physical stress, which include social support from other group members. Simply put, the social groups with which a person identifies have the potential to act as ‘social cures’ by granting group members access to social and psychological resources that promote well-being (Inoue et al., 2022; Jetten et al., 2014, 2017).

Concerning the link between fanship and SWB, researchers have proposed that identifying with a team positively correlates with various well-being outcomes (Branscombe & Wann, 1991; Inoue et al., 2015, 2017, 2022; Wann, 2006; Wann et al., 2017). Branscombe

and Wann (1991) found that fanship stimulated feelings of belongingness and heightened self-esteem. Subsequent investigations confirmed these results, highlighting fanship has a positive association with psychological (eudaimonic) and social well-being, as well as positive emotional (hedonic) states (Inoue et al., 2015; Wann et al., 1999; Wann & Pierce, 2005). We therefore hypothesise that:

**H2a:** Fanship is positively associated with SWB.

In line with the health benefits of social identification (Haslam et al., 2009; Jetten et al., 2014, 2017), existing literature indicates a positive association between fandom and fans' well-being (Reysen et al., 2017a, 2022a, 2022b). Reysen et al. (2022a, 2022b) investigated both fandom and fanship as predictors of fans' psychological well-being, defined as "perception of engagement with existential challenges of life" (Keyes et al., 2002, p. 1007). Their findings showed that fandom had a stronger relationship with psychological well-being than fanship (Reysen et al., 2022a, 2022b). In addition, fandom was found to be positively associated with self-esteem (Reysen et al., 2022a). In all these studies, the relationship between fandom and different forms of well-being was established by (a) social activities, (b) intragroup helping or (c) friendship volume (Reysen et al., 2022a, 2022b). This supports the assumption that social interactions enable the efficient dynamic between social identification and psychosocial benefits (Haslam et al., 2009; Jetten et al., 2017; Wann, 2006). Fandom directly captures a person's social identification with the broader fan community (Reysen et al., 2022b). Hence, our next hypothesis is:

**H2b:** Fandom is positively associated with SWB, and this association is stronger than the association between fanship and SWB.

### **The relationships between fanship, fandom and attitudinal loyalty**

When individuals identify with a group, they are expected to express and exhibit consistent group loyalty, particularly under perceived external threat to the group's social

identity (Ellemers et al., 2002; Van Vugt & Hart, 2004). The SIA posits that in the face of identity threats—possibly arising from negative group outcomes (Turner et al., 1984)—high identifiers express high levels of group cohesiveness, attraction and ultimately loyalty.

Loyalty is a multifaceted and complex construct that has been theorised in terms of behavioural and attitudinal dimensions (Day, 1969). Of them, we focus on attitudinal team loyalty, which refers to the outcome of the interactions between external pressures to change and mature attitudes toward a team. It is featured by (a) choice persistence, (b) resistance to change, (c) cognitive processing biases towards the choice, and (d) behavioural model (Heere & Dickinson, 2008).

At the individual level, research has highlighted the stability and persistence of identification with a beloved team (Lock et al., 2014) and its positive association with attitudinal loyalty (Matsuoka et al., 2003; Stevens & Rosenberger, 2012). Investigating Australian rugby league fans, Stevens and Rosenberg (2012) observed team identification (i.e., fanship) to be a better predictor of team loyalty than sport and team involvement. Furthermore, fanship was found to be negatively associated with changes in fans' behaviours (Harada & Matsuoka, 1999), indicating that individuals with stronger fanship tend to remain loyal to their team. Thus, we hypothesise that:

**H3a:** Fanship is positively associated with attitudinal loyalty.

Ellemers et al. (2002) argued that high identifiers face the fear of being excluded from their group (or potentially excluded in the future). As such, they are expected to react to this fear by (a) perceiving higher ingroup homogeneity, (b) accepting (or not accepting) a more peripheral group position, or (c) displaying group prototypical behaviours, particularly in social occasions. This last consideration relates to the existence of a tacit 'nonabandonment' rule "which conveys that once people become involved in a group, they must show their loyalty, especially when the group most needs it—in the presence of an attractive exit" (Van

Vugt & Hart, 2004, p. 588). As groups hold normative attributes, the SIA posits individuals who strongly identify with their groups are more influenced by group-induced norms than low-identifiers (Smith et al., 2007; Terry & Hogg, 1996). High identifiers have a greater tendency to remain loyal to their groups as they are more positively and favourably biased towards fellow ingroup members (Van Vugt & Hart, 2004). In team identification research, it has been demonstrated that high identifiers with the fan community show more elevated degrees of loyal behaviours and intentions toward the beloved team rather than low identifiers (Yoshida et al., 2015a, 2015b). This leads to our next hypothesis:

**H3b:** Fandom is positively associated with attitudinal loyalty.

### **SWB mediating the associations between fanship, fandom and attitudinal loyalty**

SWB is composed of several components, including positive affect, low level of negative affect and satisfaction with important life domains (Diener, 2000). Life satisfaction, satisfaction with physical and financial conditions, and satisfaction with needs fulfilment are considered crucial sub-elements of SWB (Diener, 2000; Inoue et al., 2017, 2020; Lui & Fernando, 2018).

Relationship marketing research reveals that fanship predicts loyal intentions towards a team and high identifiers are less affected by satisfaction with (a) game score, (b) performance quality and (c) contest excellence, than low identifiers (Matsuoka et al., 2003). Nevertheless, the combination of fanship and satisfaction with a team appears to predict loyalty more intensely than fanship alone (Matsuoka et al., 2003). Focusing on consumers, Bodet and Bernache-Assollant (2011) provide empirical support for a model in which customer satisfaction with a team brand positively predicts fanship which in turn positively and directly affects attitudinal loyalty to a team. Also in consumer research, being satisfied with service and product experiences is considered an essential part of consumers' SWB (Lee

et al., 2002). Therefore, we expect that the previous findings can be extended to and mirrored by overall SWB construct. We hypothesise that:

**H3c:** SWB positively mediates the relationship between fanship and attitudinal loyalty.

Furthermore, based on the SIA research on health and well-being, individuals with strong social identification are expected to receive positive feelings from group membership because it confers access to social and psychological resources that enable them to cope with stressful or disadvantageous situations (Haslam et al., 2009; Jetten et al., 2017). At the same time, because stronger social identification is internalised in the self-concept, health-oriented group norms are expected to be more pervasive leading to sustained group membership and engagement in group activities (Jetten et al., 2017). Accordingly, we predict that social identification (i.e., fandom) has the potential to enhance individuals' SWB (Jetten et al., 2017) which, in turn, may positively affect identified fans' attitudinal loyalty. Accordingly, we posit that:

**H3d:** SWB positively mediates the relationship between fandom and attitudinal loyalty.

### **The moderating role of emotional attachment**

The SIA posits emotions are elements of internalised group identities (Tajfel, 1982). In some empirical cases (Hinkle et al., 1989; Karasawa, 1991), the affective dimension of identity was found to be more influential than its cognitive counterpart in strengthening social identification. This phenomenon appears to occur when group membership is meaningful to a person and deeply rooted in the self (Tajfel, 1982). Researchers have investigated the relationships between team identification and discrete emotions (Biscaia et al., 2012; Prayag et al., 2020), and emotional support (Inoue et al., 2015, 2020, 2022; Katz et al., 2020). However, although there have been SIA-based conceptualisations and studies concerning

emotional attachment (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Paxton & Moody, 2003), prior research has not clarified how emotional attachment interacts with fanship or fandom.

Emotional attachment is rooted in Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory, which focused on the bonds formed between infants and caregivers and has been extended to adult relationships. Emotional attachment refers to "an emotion-laden target-specific bond between a person and a specific object" (Bowlby, 1969, p. 87–88). According to consumer research, while identification exhibits cognitive and evaluative connotations before encompassing the related affective meanings, attachment tends to capture the degree of emotional bond consumers have with consumptive objects (Ladhari et al., 2022; Sen et al., 2015). Thus, identification and attachment are complementary constructs that enable deeper understanding of consumer-organisation connections (Sen et al., 2015). Foundational work by Ball and Tasaki (1982) established the importance of emotional attachment in consumer relationships, demonstrating that stronger emotional bonds can lead to increased loyalty and reduced switching behaviours. Similarly, Park et al. (2010) highlighted the role of emotional attachment in consumer decision-making, showing that consumers who feel emotionally attached to a brand are more likely to exhibit loyalty and advocacy. Thomson et al. (2005) developed an original measure of emotional attachment, which quantifies perceptions of affection, passion and connection. While effective for capturing general sentiments, Thomson et al.'s scale may not fully encompass the intricacies of emotional experiences associated with brand relationships (Jimenez & Voss, 2014). To address these limitations, Jimenez and Voss (2014) proposed an alternative measurement framework that integrates qualitative insights with quantitative assessments. Jimenez and Voss's scale reflects the high degree of abstraction featuring the construct and aims at capturing the extent of emotional attachment and not the behaviours related to it.

Experimental methods have also been utilised to explore emotional attachment, providing a dynamic approach to measuring consumer responses. For instance, researchers have employed priming techniques to evoke specific emotions prior to brand evaluations, demonstrating that emotional stimuli are associated with attachment levels and subsequent consumer behaviour (Murray & Rethans, 2018).

To operationalise emotional attachment, we focus on individual-level emotional attachment, in response to calls for further research on how this construct interacts with identification (Dwyer et al., 2015). At the individual level, emotional attachment refers to the sum of what fans cognitively invest in terms of bonding and passion (i.e., investment) and the corresponding emotional value received from supporting a team. It consists of energisation, happiness, delight and emotionality (i.e., dividend) (Dwyer et al., 2015). Although consumers may identify with a brand without an emotional attachment (Sen et al., 2015), there is evidence from fans of new teams that the emotional significance of identification develops as knowledge of a team and its players forms in memory (Lock et al., 2012). Furthermore, this can develop into a long-lasting emotional attachment to a team (Dwyer et al., 2015; Sen et al., 2015). Specifically, through long term direct experience, fans who individually identify with a team create an emotional attachment towards the team (Dwyer et al., 2015; Lock et al., 2012) which affects perceived satisfaction (Paxton & Moody, 2003). As team-oriented cognitive investment and emotional dividend increase in magnitude, identified fans perceive a sense of protection and security from team-induced positive emotions (Sen et al., 2015; Thomson et al., 2005) and higher satisfaction (Ladhari et al., 2022). Ultimately, emotional attachment to a team has the capacity to strengthen the relationship between personal identification with the team and the relative psychological benefits (Lee et al., 2002; Sato et al., 2023). Building on this evidence, we expect emotional attachment to strengthen the relationship between fanship and SWB. This argument also aligns with SIA-based

conceptualisations in which emotional value is present in group memberships that are internalised and meaningful to a person (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Accordingly, as a fan's emotional attachment increases, the relationship between fandom and SWB is expected to intensify. We therefore hypothesise as follows:

**H4a:** Emotional attachment positively moderates the associations between fanship and SWB, and between fandom and SWB.

There is evidence highlighting that football fans' emotional attachment to a team brand has a positive association with their attitudinal loyalty (Park et al., 2010) and resistance to change (Lehmann et al., 2008). Likewise, Hallberg (2003) observed that emotional attachment was a significant predictor of brand loyalty. Similar results emerged in a recent investigation of Canadian hockey fans' emotional attachment to a team brand (Ladhari et al., 2022). Since fanship is also positively correlated with attitudinal loyalty, even in the absence of satisfaction with the team performance (Matsuoka et al., 2003), existing evidence suggests that the interaction between fanship and emotional attachment can strengthen attitudinal loyalty. Indeed, we would expect identified fans who emotionally invest to display behavioural loyalty towards the team. Furthermore, the SIA posits that as social identification and emotional attachment increase, members are more likely to engage in group participation and activities (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000). The emotions attached to identification and participation (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Paxton & Moody, 2003) have the theoretical potential to positively moderate the relationship between fandom and attitudinal loyalty. Therefore:

**H4b:** Emotional attachment positively moderates the associations between fanship and attitudinal loyalty, and between fandom and attitudinal loyalty.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants and procedures**

Data were collected by conducting a cross-sectional survey targeting adult fans of S.S. Lazio and A.S. Roma football clubs. It was required that participants were self-described fans of the clubs, and their ages ranged from 18 to 85 years old. The questionnaire was distributed in on-site and online data collection settings. The on-site setting was based on a direct, in person approach and completion of the online questionnaire by participants outside the Stadio Olimpico (Olympic Stadium, the home stadium of both teams) before home games of both teams (see Table 1). On-site participants completed the survey on their mobile phones after having scanned a QR code provided by the research team before entering home venue gates. For the on-site setting, we gathered data from fans experiencing the live game atmosphere while alleviating potential (positive or negative) in-game or post-game result biases. We distributed online questionnaire links in three ways: (a) among official S.S. Lazio/A.S. Roma fan club members through official contacts; (b) physical public flyers and posters positioned in various spots across the Stadio Olimpico park and within local university facilities; and (c) posting on unofficial S.S. Lazio/A.S. Roma Facebook private fan groups. For the on-site setting and the use of posters and flyers, a shared QR code enabled digital access to the questionnaire.

In total, 604 fans participated in the study. Thirty surveys were removed because of missing responses, and three more were removed for low engagement rate (i.e., standard deviation across answers was lower than 0.30) (Nisar et al., 2020). The final sample included 571 fans, of which 213 were recruited on-site, and 358 completed the questionnaire online. The mean age of the final sample was 37 years ( $SD = 6.2$ , range 18–82). In terms of gender diversity (i.e., Delia et al., 2022), 29.9% of the sample were women, 69.4% were men, and four participants did not disclose their gender. Overall, 49.9% of survey participants were full-time employees; 45.9% held a secondary school certificate/diploma; 86.3 % were

residents within Roman metropolitan area; 61.6% practiced amateur sporting activities; and 55% were A.S. Roma supporters and 45% were S.S. Lazio fans.

## Measures

All survey items were rated on a seven-point-Likert scale ranging from “1 – strongly disagree” to “7 – strongly agree” (see Table 2). *Fanship* was measured with three items (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .92$ ) from the original Fanship scale (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010). This scale was developed as a measure of individual connection to fan’s interest-object (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010). Fanship or team identification has been measured with other unidimensional measures, including the SSIS (Wann & Branscombe, 1993) and the TII (Trail & James, 2001), as well as multidimensional measures, including the Team\*ID scale (Heere & James, 2007) and Dimmock et al.’s (2005) team identification scale. We opted to use the Fanship scale, as the scale was specifically developed in distinction to fandom and showed discriminant validity when it was measured with fandom in the same model (Plante et al., 2020). This 3-items reduced version of the Fanship scale has been commonly used in fanship and fandom research (Plante et al., 2020; Reysen et al., 2017b,  $\alpha = .91$ ; Reysen et al., 2022b,  $\alpha = .93$ ).

We used three items from the social identification scale (Doosje et al., 1995) to measure *fandom* ( $\alpha = .92$ ), in line with previous work (Cassidy et al., 2014; Reysen et al., 2013, 2017, 2022b). In addition, we used four items from the Attitudinal Loyalty to Team Scale (ALTS) (Heere & Dickson, 2008) ( $\alpha = .92$ ), which replicated past studies (Dwyer, 2011; Tachis & Tzetzis, 2015; White et al., 2023).

Concerning *SWB*, we used 17 items from the Well-Being Scale (WeBS) (Lui & Fernando, 2018), which provided high reliability ( $\alpha = .96$ ). Although this scale has not been used in prior team identification research, it showed consistent reliability and construct validity for overall and dimension-specific SWB in health studies (Abdul Kadir et al., 2021,  $\alpha$

=.92; Lamarche et al., 2021,  $\alpha = .95$ ; Krzyzanowski et al., 2021). Accordingly, the WeBS constitutes a “valid measure of multiple aspects of well-being” (Abdul Kadir et al., 2021 p.3). While this scale is originally composed of 29 items and 5 sub-domains (including financial and physical well-being), we decided to focus on the social, eudemonic and hedonic dimensions of fans’ SWB, which are more relevant to the psychological benefits of team sport consumption (Inoue et al., 2020; Wann, 2006).

Finally, regarding *emotional attachment*, a wide variety of psychometric measures exist which mirrors the plethora of definitions of the construct (Jimenez & Voss, 2014). Park et al. (2010) developed an emotional attachment scale which is more connected to the concept of brand and measuring brand self-connection and brand prominence. Thomson et al. (2005) provided a first psychometrically oriented instrument to evaluate the degree of specific emotions and feelings. Jimenez and Voss’s (2014) Emotional Attachment Scale (2014) was another well-established measure, but it does not refer to specific emotions. While acknowledging the potential utility of these scales, in line with our purpose and definition of emotional attachment discussed above, we opted to use the Emotional Attachment to Sport Team Scale (EAST; Dwyer et al., 2015) for two reasons. First, the scale was developed in the sports marketing field with the practical aim of capturing the magnitude of specific emotions (and not context- or object-specific behaviours) related to the team, which is the specific focus of our study. Second, Dwyer et al. (2015) highlighted the interaction between emotional attachment—as measured by the EAST—and identification as a future line of research.

### **Back translation**

We developed all scales and items in English. After adapting the items to the research setting, the questionnaire was translated to Italian using a back translation process (Brislin, 1970). Accordingly, two bilingual authors produced English-to-Italian and Italian-to-English

translations of the questionnaire. Next, a native English speaker assessed discrepancies and similarities between the original and back translated versions. Since we did not find significant differences, the English and Italian questionnaires were considered equivalent. This process was deemed coherent and suitable in previous sports management and marketing studies (e.g., Yoshida et al., 2015a, 2023).

## **Analysis and Results**

### **Measurement model**

We observed significant skewness and kurtosis in the distribution of our indicators of latent factors, except for Fandom indicators. The skewness values ranged between +/- 2.3, while the Kurtosis values ranged from positive to negative 5. These results fall within the broader rules for normality suggested by Kline (2011). Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed via IBM AMOS 29 by including all the multi-item scales described above. The model fit indices from the CFA were acceptable ( $\chi^2 / df = 1778.32/512 = 3.47$ , CFI = .94, SRMR = .05, RMSEA = .07). As presented in Table 3, convergent validity across all measures were confirmed as construct reliability coefficients were .92 or above (threshold is  $> .70$ ) and average variance extracted (AVE) values were .74 or above (threshold is  $> .50$ ) for all latent constructs (Hair et al., 2021). The square root of each AVE was higher than each pair of correlation coefficients, which supported discriminant validity among constructs (MacKenzie et al., 2011).

We conducted Cook's distance analysis (outliers have scores  $> 1.00$ ), which indicated there were no multivariate outliers. To check for multicollinearity, we produced variable inflation factors (VIFs) for the relationships tested. No VIFs were greater than 2, which is below the threshold of 10 (O'Brien, 2007). Finally, we ran a common method bias test using a common latent factor approach (Serrano Archimi et al., 2018). The chi-square difference test between zero-constrained and unconstrained models was significant ( $\Delta\chi^2 (\Delta df = 36) = 278.21$ ,

$p < .001$ ). Accordingly, we retained the common latent factor for the structural analyses, in line with previous research (Serrano Archimi et al., 2018). We did not present the common latent factor in the visual representation of the model (Figure 1 and 2) for clearer presentation.

### **Structural model**

We tested the structural model shown in Figure 2. The goodness-of-fit indices ( $\chi^2 / df = 3.68$ , CFI= 0.931, RMSEA = 0.069, SRMR = 0.503) were acceptable (MacKenzie et al., 2011). H1 proposed that fanship and fandom are distinct yet correlating constructs. First, no convergent validity issues were observed for each of the two constructs. Concerning discriminant validity, the AVE values of both scales were greater than the square of their correlation (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), and the correlation between constructs (.842) was lower than the .950 threshold for testing empirical redundancy and random error effect (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). In line with MacKenzie et al. (2011), we fixed the covariance of fanship and fandom to 1.0. Next, we conducted a chi-square difference test which confirmed that the constrained model (with the covariance constrained to 1.0) performed significantly worse than the original hypothesised model which allowed fanship and fandom to freely correlate (see Table 4). As such, H1 was supported.

H2a hypothesised that fanship was positively associated with SWB. The model findings indicated that this relationship was nonsignificant ( $\beta = .079$ ,  $p = .501$ ). Accordingly, H2a was not supported. H2b hypothesised that fandom is positively associated with SWB. The structural model revealed that this relationship was positive and significant ( $\beta = .226$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Given the positive association between fanship and SWB, H2b was supported.

Table 5 shows the results concerning H3 and H4. There was a positive and significant relationship between fanship (and not fandom) and attitudinal loyalty ( $\beta = .684$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Accordingly, H3a is supported, while H3b is rejected. Furthermore, SWB had a positive

mediating effect on the relationship between fandom (and not fanship) and attitudinal loyalty ( $\beta = .047$ , lower value  $.007$ , upper value  $.124$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Thus, H3c is rejected while H3d is retained. There was also a positive and significant association between SWB and attitudinal loyalty ( $\beta = .230$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Our moderation analysis revealed that emotional attachment had a significant negative moderating effect on the paths from fanship to SWB ( $\beta = -.229$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and fandom to attitudinal loyalty ( $\beta = -.257$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In both cases, individuals with high emotional attachment reported elevated levels of SWB and attitudinal loyalty when their identification was low (see Figures 3 and 4). Nevertheless, both H4a and H4b are rejected.

### **Discussion**

The aims of this study were to: (a) compare the relative associations that fanship and fandom had with SWB and attitudinal loyalty; (b) observe the mediating role of SWB in the associations between fanship, fandom, and attitudinal loyalty; and (c) explore the moderating effects of fans' emotional attachment to the team. While previous research has focused on the relationships between individual or group-based discrete emotions and fanship (Campo et al., 2019; Gordon et al., 2021; Prayag et al., 2020), this work answered calls for further exploration of individual-level emotional attachment (Dwyer et al., 2015) in relation to fanship and fandom (Reysen et al., 2022b). Our results have four theoretical implications.

#### **Theoretical implications**

First, we have demonstrated that when combined with elevated levels of fanship or fandom, high degrees of emotional attachment can reduce the associations between fanship and SWB, and fandom and attitudinal loyalty. In addition, when identification was low, emotional attachment was associated with elevated levels of SWB and attitudinal loyalty, confirming the centrality of affective attachment. From a social identity perspective, high values of the emotional dimension of identification, in conjunction with high degrees of

either fanship or fandom, appeared to burden the football fans we sampled. Our results indicated that having elevated degrees of both emotional attachment and personal identification can reduce the satisfaction and happiness individuals might experience from their identification. Moreover, when emotionally and strongly attached to the team, high identifiers with the broader fan community may display reduced attitudinal loyalty towards the team.

Second, our results support the idea that, in the case of high degrees of fandom, SWB has a positive relationship with attitudinal loyalty. We found that SWB positively mediated the relationships between fandom and attitudinal loyalty. At the group identity level, our findings align with social identity research concerning health and well-being, in particular when considering that group membership (a) increases self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and (b) provides social and psychological resources to cope with stressors, identity threats, and disadvantageous situations (Haslam et al., 2009; Jetten et al., 1997, 2014; Turner et al., 1984). In line with previous research, interpersonal interconnections enhanced by supporting a favourite team appeared to stimulate the relationship between fandom and SWB (Reysen et al., 2017a, 2022b), thus explaining the mediating role of SWB in the model.

Third, while socially identifying with other fans and the broader fan community was positively associated with SWB, we found that personally identifying with the team/club has a positive association with attitudinal loyalty. In aggregate terms, these results are in line with previous arguments that: (a) fanship are predominantly associated with measures and constructs related to sport consumption (Reysen et al, 2022b), and (b) well-being is more strongly influenced by fandom than fanship (Reysen et al., 2022a, 2022b).

Finally, while stress and hostile activities can negatively influence emotional attachment dynamics (Paxton & Moody, 2003), emotional attachment is deemed to be affected by organisations' past glory and history (Gordon et al., 2021; Paxton & Moody,

2003). Although both studied clubs are historically important in Italian football, their successes at both the national and international levels are limited when compared to their rivals (e.g., F.C. Juventus, F.C. Inter Milan, A.C. Milan). The limited historical success of each club might negatively affect the relationships that fanship and fandom have with emotional attachment, and with the other outcomes we tested (Gordon et al., 2021; Paxton & Moody, 2003).

### **Practical implications**

Marketers and managers can benefit from this research, particularly in terms of considering emotional attachment and well-being. Our underlying argument is that emotional attachment should not overwhelm the other components of identification, specifically when an individual strongly identifies with a team or fellow fans. First, anticipating consumers' emotional attachment and well-being states might be beneficial for sport industry professionals and organisations (Kim & Kim, 2023; Prayag et al., 2020). Therefore, researching and collecting data on the emotional attachment and well-being of their fans—using measures adopted in this study or other scales—might enable clubs to gain an in-depth picture of identified fans who follow them. This appears highly important as our findings indicated the need for clubs and sports organisations to consider fans as key emotional stakeholders (Senaux, 2008; Zagnoli & Radicchi, 2010). As fans are unable to regulate the affective dimension of their identification with the team and with other fans, identification might negatively influence fans' well-being, which could, in turn, reduce their loyal attitudes and behaviours. In order to avoid this, organisations and clubs might support peer-led initiatives and work closely with their official fan clubs and sub-groups to foster a culture of emotional regulation. Specifically, club could search for and identify prototypical emotional leaders among fans, such as recognised in-group members who are recognised as role models in response to specific crisis (Inoue et al., 2020). By analysing the general spectrum of team

fans and specific sub-groups, clubs might interact and empower prototypical fan leaders performing as informal regulators and set the tone for others. Thus, while stimulating the co-creation of fan communities, organisations can stimulate occasions—both in presence and online—peer fans-led dialogues about how to support the team while maintaining control over emotions as well as and help them spread the word about emotional relief and education. This might be crucially effective particularly in those male-dominated sports contexts—like football—since men (especially young ones) tend to stigmatise emotional expression, discouraging individuals from seeking social or emotional support when dealing with stress or mental health challenges (Hillard et al., 2019). This is due to broader societal norms regarding masculinity and sports culture which clubs and leagues are expected to attempt at tackling.

At the systemic level, clubs, institutions, and leagues can promote healthy competition narratives shaping rivalries in a positive way, emphasising respect and tradition rather than hatred and hostility. Media, club announcements, and player interviews should promote sportspersonship over disrespect as well as promoting shared nostalgia. Also, leagues might promote a shared vision and responsibility to support emotional regulation of fans through joint initiatives or agreements between rival clubs.

Moreover, through official communications, ads, and marketing strategies, clubs may suggest positive approaches and best practices to channel and smooth potential overwhelming emotional attachment to the team. Additionally, club-oriented emotional relief and regulation might occur through social interactions with other identified club fans in physical spaces, events, and online platforms. Whether in person or online, these occasions might be still monitored and led by psychologists and counsellors. Specific staff members might be charged by clubs to monitor and assist fans emotional response on social media. Venting has been recognised as a strategy to cope with negative emotional pressure (Kim & Kim, 2023). This

might occur in ad-hoc structures and through specific activities managed by clubs.

Complementarily, some fans may need relaxation over venting. Accordingly, clubs can provide calm and safe spaces at sporting venues, giving fans the opportunity to take a break from the noise and stimulation of the competition if they need to. Creating a balanced environment helps fans manage stress and enjoy the game without feeling overwhelmed. Some of these strategies are already in use in different leagues and clubs, and they can be considered highly fruitful for enhancing the balance between fans' identification and emotional attachment.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Despite the theoretical and practical implications, limits to the current study should be acknowledged. To begin, the negative and nonsignificant moderating effect of emotional attachment might be explained by the individualistic conceptualisation of emotional attachment we used (Dwyer et al., 2015). This nuance is reflected in the instrument we employed. Given the adoption of the SIA as our theoretical framework, a group-based understanding of emotions may have yielded different findings.

Second, the focus on fanship and fandom did not allow us to analyse different categories of sports fans concerning the proposed model, such as local versus displaced fans (Lintumaeki & Koll, 2023), season ticket holders versus other segments of purchase category (e.g. single-game attendees) (Zagnoli & Radicchi, 2010) and the typology of temporary, local, devoted, fanatical, and dysfunctional fans (Hunt et al., 1999). As diverse types of sport consumers (and fans) hold different degrees of emotional significance attached to the team (Hunt et al., 1999)—and potentially different behaviours, future research might investigate the discrepancies among groups in relation to the two forms of identification.

Furthermore, although fanship appears to remain stable across times and game results (Doyle et al., 2017; Lock et al., 2014), perceptions of emotional attachment may be affected

by specific sporting results and different trends throughout the season. Hence, a longitudinal analysis may add useful knowledge concerning fanship, fandom and the affective dimensions across seasonal time span and positive/negative performance trends.

It is also important to underline that our study intentionally investigated the association and not causality between involved constructs. Future research might investigate causal relationships in the model to strengthen highlighted results.

Additionally, we focused on the attitudinal dimension of loyalty, as it has been consistently studied in sport marketing and management research (Bodet & Bernache-Assollant, 2011; Day, 1969; Heere & Dickinson, 2008; Matsuoka et al., 2003; Toder Alon et al., 2022) and in team identification research (Bodet & Bernache-Assollant, 2011; Matsuoka et al., 2003). Nevertheless, analysing the interactions between different forms of identifications and emotional attachment might reveal differential effects on fans' well-being and loyalty. Thus, future research may consider assessing behavioural loyalty alongside attitudinal loyalty.

Furthermore, while passion is an indicator of emotional attachment investment (Dwyer et al., 2015) and is closely tied with identities and identification (Vallerand et al., 2003), our study did not examine this construct. According to Vallerand et al. (2003), while a person's harmonious passion is in balance with other life domains and identities, obsessive passion is invasive and takes a large share of a person's self, thus centralising resources. Obsessiveness takes place on a person's uninterrupted engagement and positive performance in a passionate activity since the same activity is crucial for the individual's perceptions of self-worth (Vallerand et al., 2003). In obsessive passion, engagement is performed even when the returns are negative as in the case of this study results (Vallerand et al., 2003). Italian football fans are well-known for their passion towards a team, and identifying with a team or a fan community borders on religious devotion for many (Billings et al., 2022; Statz et al.,

2022). As football culture monopolises the overall share of sport fans' identities, the Italian sociocultural environment might encourage obsessive passions. Future research may explore the interacting dynamics between fanship, fandom and passion.

Finally, the teams and fans examined in this study belonged to a similar sociocultural background—they were from the same city—and have witnessed similar sporting results throughout their history. Accordingly, future research might compare our results with data obtained in relation to other football teams and different team sports in varying sociocultural contexts.

### **Conclusions**

Identifying with a team or group of fans can have a significant emotional dimension (Biscaia et al., 2012; Prayag et al., 2020; Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Therefore, understanding how emotional attachment can affect fanship and fandom is fundamental to augment future research and managerial strategies (Dwyer et al., 2015). The current research underlines the potential negative side of elevated emotional attachment. Specifically, our findings demonstrate that high emotional attachment conditions uncover reduced SWB for high identifiers with the team (fanship) as well as low attitudinal loyalty for high identifiers with fellow fans (fandom). Furthermore, fandom is positively associated with perceptions of SWB. In turn, SWB displayed a positive association with attitudinal loyalty. For the first time, we have demonstrated the interacting roles of emotional attachment with the team and team identification (Dwyer et al., 2015). Finally, the current research extends academic knowledge concerning the distinction between fanship and fandom (Reysen et al., 2022b; Reysen & Branscombe, 2010) as well as social identity research on health and well-being (Haslam et al., 2009; Jetten et al., 2017). Managers and marketers can benefit from this study by employing a strategic approach that promotes an educative role of clubs and institutions and integrates emotional regulation initiatives.

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**Table 1. On-site data collection events and surveys collected.**

Date	Time	Game	Championship	Survey participants
05/03/2023	20.45	Roma - Juventus	Serie A	3
07/03/2023	18.45	Lazio – AZ	UEFA Conference League	25
09/03/2023	18.45	Roma - Real Sociedad	UEFA Conference League	22
12/03/2023	18.00	Roma - Sassuolo	Serie A	5
19/03/2023	18.00	Lazio - Roma	Serie A	2
02/04/2023	18.00	Roma - Sampdoria	Serie A	4
08/04/2023	20.45	Lazio - Juventus	Serie A	10
16/04/2023	20.45	Roma - Udinese	Serie A	13
20/04/2023	21.00	Roma - Feyenoord	UEFA Conference League	20
22/04/2023	18.00	Lazio - Torino	Serie A	9
29/04/2023	18.00	Roma - Milan	Serie A	12
03/05/2023	21.00	Lazio - Sassuolo	Serie A	53
06/05/2023	18.00	Roma - Inter	Serie A	12
11/05/2023	21.00	Roma - Leverkusen	UEFA Conference League	10
12/05/2023	20.45	Lazio - Lecce	Serie A	9
22/05/2023	18.30	Roma - Salernitana	Serie A	11
27/05/2023	18.30	Lazio - Cremonese	Serie A	8

**Table 2. Survey: scale, items and Cronbach's Alpha**

Constructs	Cronbach's Alpha	Dimensions	Items
Fanship	.918	Unidimensional	<p>"I am emotionally connected as A.S. Roma/ S.S. Lazio."</p> <p>"I strongly identify with A.S. Roma/ S.S. Lazio."</p> <p>"A.S. Roma/ S.S. Lazio is part of me."</p>
Fandom	.919	Unidimensional	<p>"I strongly identify with other fans of A.S. Roma/ S.S. Lazio community."</p> <p>"I see myself as a member of A.S. Roma/ S.S. Lazio community."</p> <p>"I am glad to be part of A.S. Roma/ S.S. Lazio community."</p>
		Social	<p>"I have someone who knows me well to talk to when I have problems."</p> <p>"I know I can count on my friends and/or family in a time of crisis."</p> <p>"There is at least one person I know who loves me and/or needs me."</p> <p>"I enjoy spending time with friends and/or relatives."</p>
Subjective wellbeing	.959	Eudaimonic	<p>"I plan for the future."</p> <p>"I feel confident that I am able to solve most problems I face."</p> <p>"I get along with people in general."</p> <p>"I believe I have the potential to reach my goals."</p> <p>"I believe that I can make a difference in the lives of others."</p> <p>"Life has meaning for me."</p> <p>"I am satisfied with my spirituality."</p> <p>"I think I am as smart as, or smarter than, others."</p> <p>"I often do things that bring out my creative side."</p> <p>"I like engaging in stimulating conversations."</p>
		Hedonic	<p>"I try to do things that make me happy."</p> <p>"I feel happy often."</p> <p>"I enjoy life."</p>
Attitudinal loyalty	.918	Unidimensional	<p>"I would still be committed to A.S. Roma/ S.S. Lazio regardless of the lack of any star players."</p> <p>"I could never switch my loyalty from the A.S. Roma/ S.S. Lazio even if my close friends were fans of another team."</p>

			“I would still be committed to the A.S. Roma/ S.S. Lazio regardless of the lack of physical skill among the players.”
			“It would be difficult to change my beliefs about the A.S. Roma/ S.S. Lazio.”
		Investment	Attached*
			Bonded*
			Passionate*
Emotional attachment	.966	Dividend	Happy*
			Delighted*
			Emotional*
			Energised*

Notes. \* These items were inserted after “When I think of A.S. Roma/ S.S. Lazio, I feel. . .”; All items were measured on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 7 = Strongly Agree).

**Table 3. Construct reliability and Average Variance Extracted**

Construct	CR	AVE	MSV	MaxR (H)	EMA	FNP	ATL	SWB	FDM
EMA	0.974	0.95	0.739	0.974	0.975				
FNP	0.922	0.797	0.739	0.924	0.860***	0.893			
ATL	0.921	0.745	0.724	0.93	0.782***	0.851***	0.863		
SWB	0.952	0.868	0.41	1,015	0.571***	0.561***	0.640***	0.932	
FDM	0.924	0.802	0.708	0.948	0.691***	0.842***	0.711***	0.527***	0.896

Notes. CR: Composite Reliability; AVE: Average Variance Extracted; MSV: Maximum Shared Variance; MaxR (H): Maximal Reliability; EMA: Emotional Attachment; FNP: Fanship; ATL: Attitudinal Loyalty to the Team; SWB: Subjective Wellbeing; FDM: Fandom.

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

**Table 4. Fanship and fandom: discriminant validity chi-square difference test.**

Hypothesis	Model	$\chi^2$	<i>df</i>	Delta $\chi^2$ ( <i>df</i> )	Decision
	Unconstrained	1886.37	514	-	-
H1	FNP $\leftrightarrow$ FDM constrained	2196.48	515	310.11 (1) ***	Support

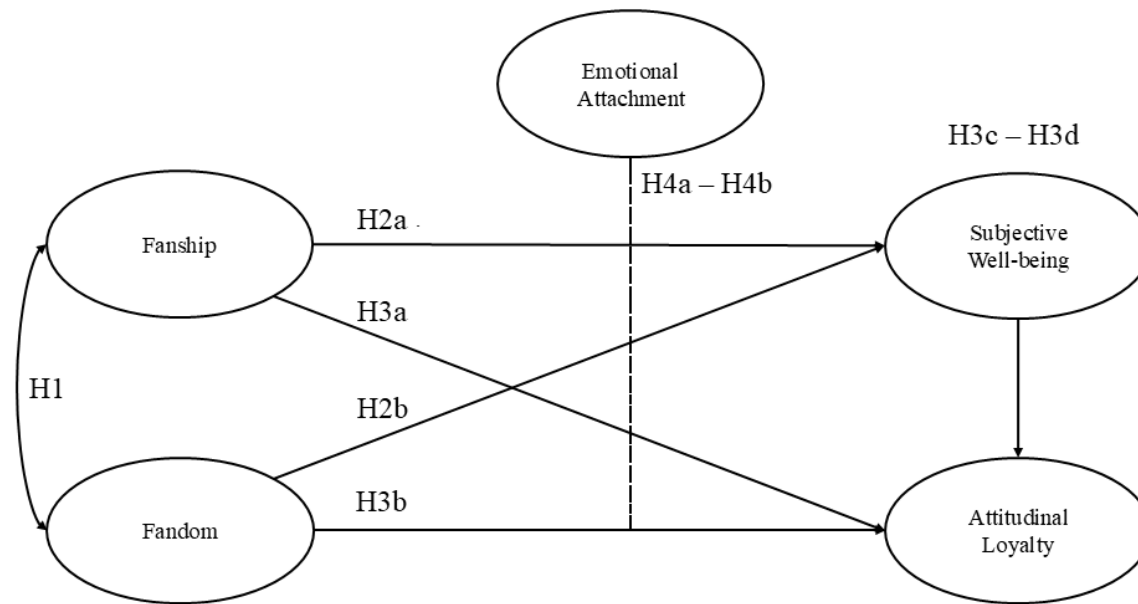
Notes. Critical value for Delta  $\chi^2$  with *df* = 1 is 10.83 at the .001 (\*\*\*) *p* < .001). FDM: Fandom; FNP: Fanship.

**Table 5. Fanship and fandom: discriminant validity chi-square difference test.**

Hypothesis	Paths	$\beta$	$B$	Lower	Upper	p-value	Decision
H3a	FNP→ATL	.684	-	-	-	***	Support
H3b	FDM→ATL	-.510	-	-	-	.373	No support
	SWB→ATL	.230	-	-	-	***	
H3c	FNP→SWB→ATL	-	.015	-.053	.082	.588	No support
H3d	FDM→SWB→ATL	-	.047	.007	.124	*	Support
H4a	EMA moderation FNP→SWB	-	-.229	-	-	***	No support
	FDM→SWB		-.053			.362	
H4b	EMA moderation FNP→ATL		.061	-	-	.188	No support
	FDM→ATL		.257			***	

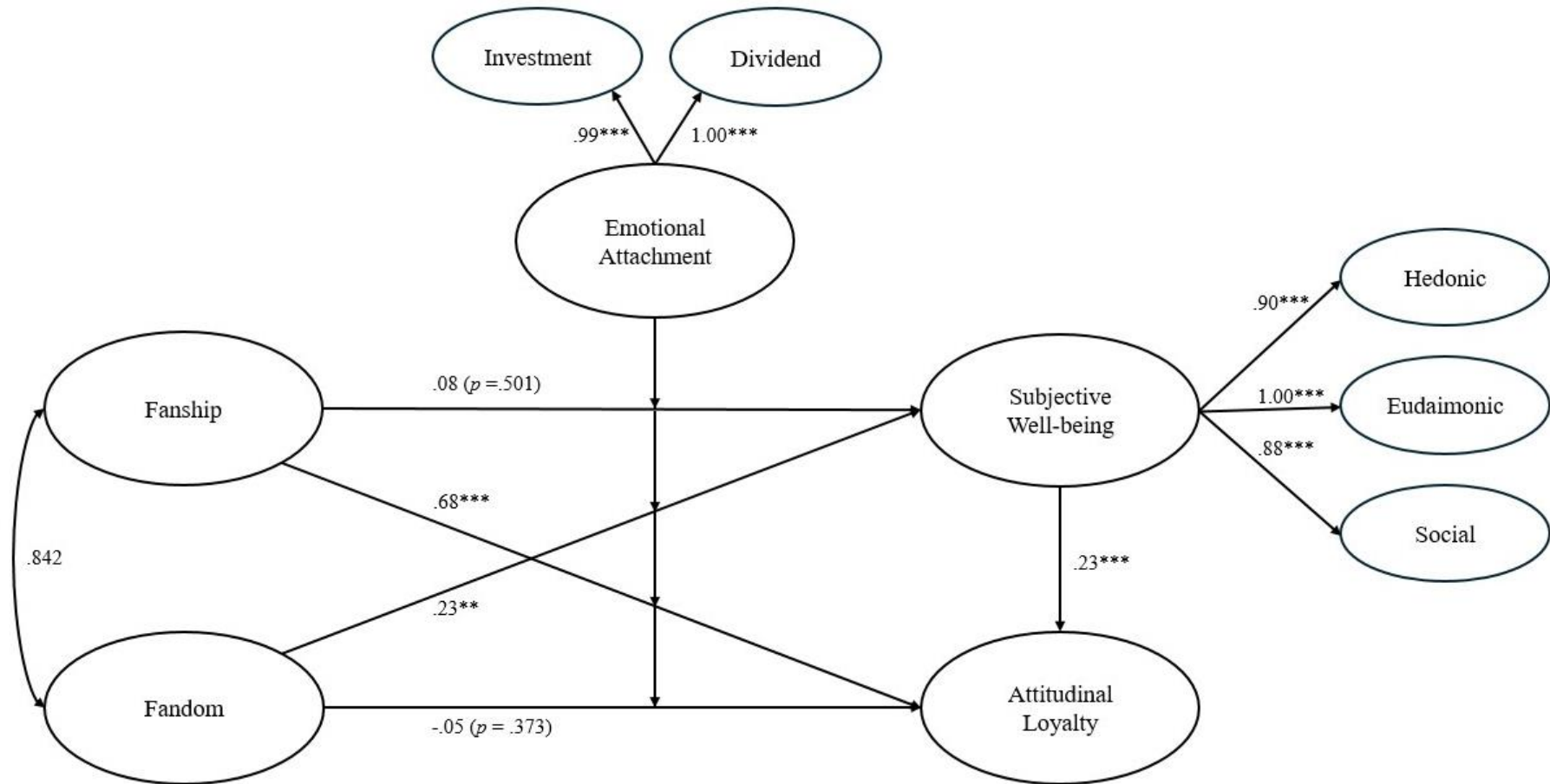
Notes.  $B$  = standardised coefficient;  $B$  = *unstandardised coefficient*; \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \* $p < .05$ . EMA: Emotional Attachment; FNP: Fanship; ATL: Attitudinal Loyalty to the Team; SWB: Subjective Wellbeing; FDM: Fandom

Figure 1. Hypothesised research model.



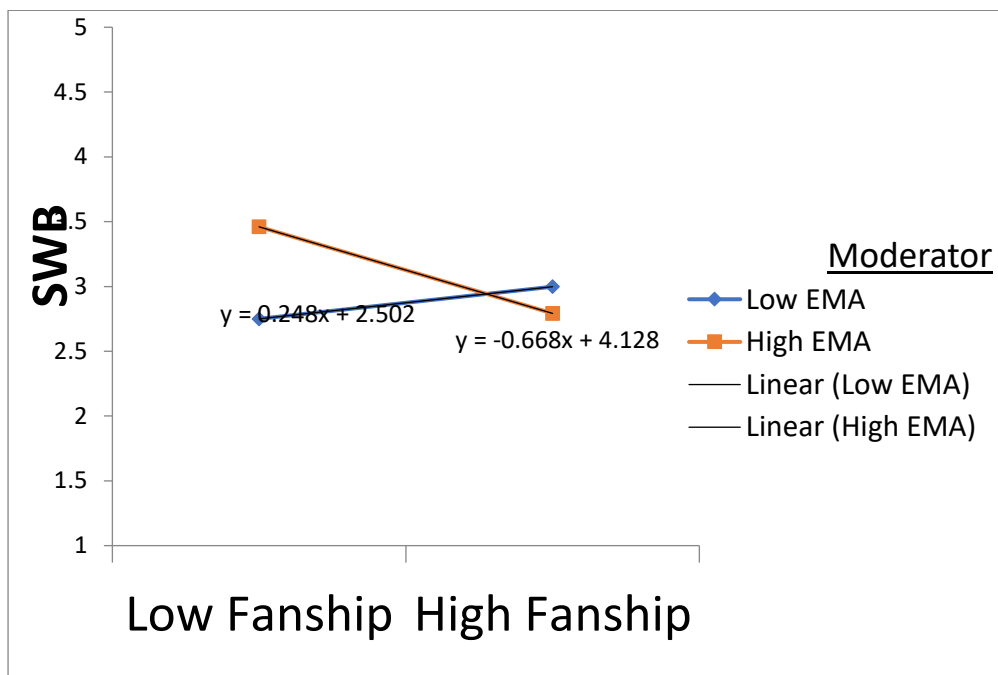
Source: authors' own elaboration.

Figure 2. Hypothesised structural model with regression weights.



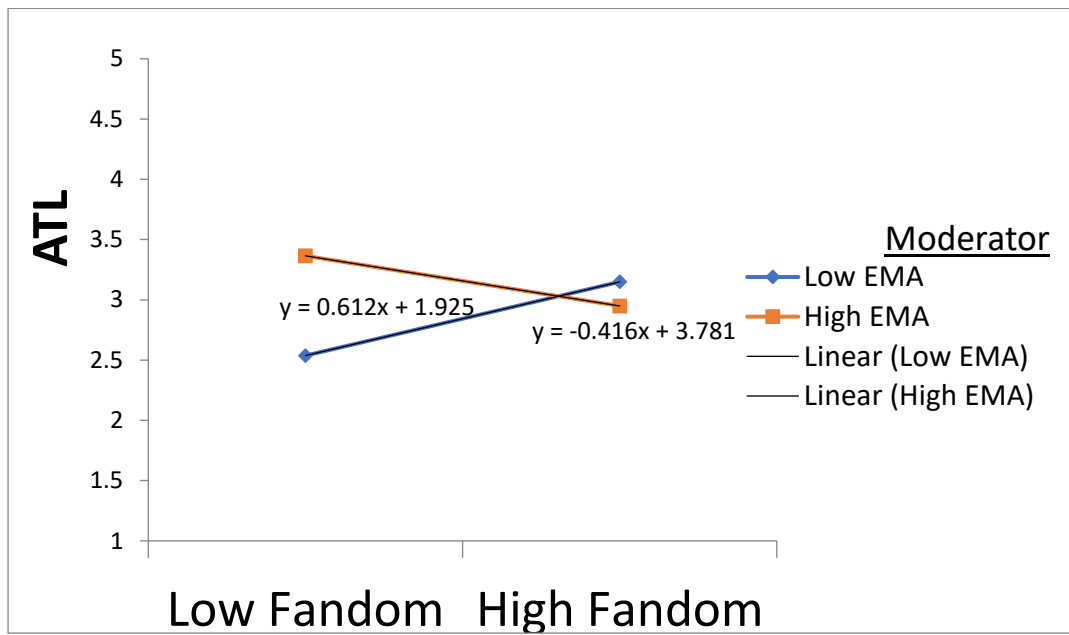
Notes. Circles represent latent variables. \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ . The model was estimated with a common method factor

**Figure 3. The moderation effect of emotional attachment in the relationship between fanship and SWB**



Notes. EMA: Emotional Attachment to the Team; SWB: Subjective Wellbeing.

**Figure 4. The moderation effect of emotional attachment in the relationship between fandom and attitudinal loyalty.**



ATL: Attitudinal Loyalty to the Team; EMA: Emotional Attachment to the Team.

Unveiling the emotional edge: How fans' emotional attachment influences the relationships between fanship, fandom, subjective well-being, and attitudinal loyalty.

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### **Abstract**

Emotions are hallmarks of more internalised and meaningful sport fan identities (Funk & James, 2001; 2006). Building on this premise, we use the social identity approach to explore how fans' emotional attachment affects the relationships between fanship (i.e., personal identification with a team), fandom (i.e., social identification with fellow fans), subjective well-being (SWB), and attitudinal loyalty. We used structural equation modelling to analyse data from fans ( $N=571$ ) of two Italian Serie A association football teams. Results highlighted a positive association between fandom and SWB. SWB positively mediated the relationship between fandom and attitudinal loyalty. Moreover, emotional attachment negatively moderated the relationships between fanship and SWB, and between fandom and attitudinal loyalty. These results indicated that high identifiers feeling strong emotional attachment to the team displayed lower SWB and attitudinal loyalty toward the team. Practitioners and organisations may benefit from implementing initiatives and programs addressing the side effects of fans' emotions.

**Keywords:** social identity approach, emotional attachment, fanship, fandom, well-being, football fans

Unveiling the emotional edge: how fans' emotional attachment influences the relationships between fanship, fandom, subjective well-being, and attitudinal loyalty

Team identification has received consistent academic attention in sport management and marketing over the last thirty years (Lock & Heere, 2017). The psychological connection between sports fans and various features of their team (e.g., logo, stadium, athletes) has been investigated in terms of brand profitability (Matsuoka et al., 2003), consumer loyalty (Bodet & Bernache-Assollant, 2011), stadium attendance (Wakefield & Sloan, 1995), and fans' well-being (Inoue et al., 2017; Reysen et al., 2022b; Wann, 2006). However, in prior work, team identification has been primarily operationalised as the relationship between fans and their team. In line with the social identity approach (SIA), it appears well founded to distinguish between fans' personal connection to their beloved team/club (fanship) and their social connection with other fans and the broader community (fandom) (Gordon et al., 2021; Yoshida et al., 2015a, 2015b, 2015c; Reysen et al., 2022a, 2022b; Reysen & Branscombe, 2010).

According to the SIA, identities have an emotional dimension, which consists of identity-oriented affective values and meanings (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Although the role of discrete and group-based emotions in individuals' identification with a team is well established (Campo et al., 2019; Gordon et al., 2021; Prayag et al., 2020), there is a lack of understanding about how individual emotional attachment to a team may interact with the personal and social identification processes of fans (Dwyer et al., 2015). To fill this research gap, we propose that emotional attachment is a distinct, yet complementary, construct that interacts with identification (Sen et al., 2015). Tajfel (1982) argued that social identification consists of cognitive and evaluative components, while emotion emerges as group membership internalises in self (Tajfel, 1982). In turn, emotional attachment relates to consumers' affective bond with an organisation (Prayag et al., 2020; Sen et al., 2015).

Considering the complementarity of identification and emotional attachment as variables, capturing consumer-organisation relationships can facilitate a better understanding of the identification process from an emotional perspective. Furthermore, individual-level emotional attachment to a team has been proposed to interact with fans' identification processes (Dwyer et al., 2015). However, the dynamics of these relationships are under researched.

Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to investigate the interactions between sport fans' emotional attachment and two forms of identification: fanship and fandom. More specifically, we aim to understand (i) the effects of fanship and fandom on fans' subjective well-being (SWB) and attitudinal loyalty to the team, and (ii) how emotional attachment moderates these effects. To fulfill our aim, we analysed data from fans of two Italian Serie A teams—S.S. Lazio and A.S. Roma. Contrary to expectations, we found that high identifiers (either with the team or its fan community) with greater emotional attachment might experience detrimental side effects. Moreover, we extend the SIA to health and well-being (Haslam et al., 2009; Inoue et al., 2022; Jetten et al., 2014, 2017) by revealing that enhancements in SWB through fandom influence the relationship between social identification and fans' loyalty. From a practical standpoint, this research emphasises the importance of recognising fans as emotional stakeholders and paying strategic attention to the connection between attachment and well-being. Based on our results, clubs may consider supporting positive peer-led initiatives aimed at raising awareness among fans about emotional regulation, promoting mental health resources, and creating supportive environments to strengthen fans' loyalty and engagement.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **The social identity approach**

The distinction and interacting dynamics between personal and social identities are one of the foundational propositions of the SIA (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Tajfel & Turner,

1979). From this perspective, individuals are driven to achieve a positive self-concept, derived from personal and social identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Personal identities relate to individualistic aspects of self that are unrelated to other people or groups. On the other hand, social identities reflect an aspirational process through which individuals actively select social groups as definitions of their self-concept. Thus, the repertoire of individuals' personal and social identities coalesce to form a broader picture of their self-concept (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

The SIA combines social identity and self-categorisation theories (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Ashmore & Jussim, 1997; Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), both of which emerged from the interactionist tradition in social psychology (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). According to the SIA, groups—like team fanbases or communities—exist because two or more individuals perceive themselves to (a) be members of the same collective, (b) share a common social identity, and (c) feel interchangeable with fellow members of the collective (Turner et al., 1987). This process of *self-categorisation* makes shared identity possible for members (Turner et al., 1987). When salient, members compare social identities with salient out-groups. Through a process of intergroup social comparison, distinctive features of the in-group are evaluated in relation to what makes 'us' meaningfully different to rivals. Group membership enhances individuals' self-distinctiveness appeals and is reinforced through specific activities (e.g., group participation) and processes (e.g., identity maintenance strategies). Shared identities within groups facilitate the process of social identification characterised by three components: cognitive realisation, evaluation, and—when identities are perceived as meaningful—emotional significance (Tajfel, 1982).

### **The SIA, fanship and fandom**

In sport fan research, the measurement of team identification has been a central topic of debate due to the complexity and multidimensionality of the construct. Team

identification, defined as the psychological connection fans feel toward their sports team, can encompass emotional attachment, cognitive involvement, and behavioural expressions (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Traditional approaches to measuring team identification often rely on unidimensional scales that focus primarily on self-reported affective loyalty or behavioural engagement, which may not capture the broader psychological and social dynamics underlying the construct (Fink, Trail, & Anderson, 2002). Furthermore, different cultural and contextual factors can influence how identification manifests, making it difficult to apply standardised metrics across diverse fan bases or sports (Lock et al., 2012).

One commonly used measure of team identification is the Sport Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS) developed by Wann and Branscombe (1993), which focuses primarily on emotional attachment and behavioural outcomes, such as game attendance and fan loyalty. While effective for measuring the degree of team identification, the SSIS is limited in its ability to capture the social dimensions of identification and the broader social-psychological processes underlying fan behaviours (Lock & Heere, 2017).

The Team Identification Index (TII; Trail & James, 2001) expanded on these ideas. Yet, while drawing from social identity theory, the scale appears to focus on the role of fans (Lock & Heere, 2017), which is out of the scope of this study. Similarly, the Team\*ID Scale (Heere & James, 2007) was designed to incorporate both personal and social identity components, acknowledging that team identification is not only an internal process but also shaped by external, social interactions. Although the Team\*ID index is a comprehensive measure of different dimensions of team identification, it is informed by four different theories (see Ashmore et al. 2004 for a detailed explication of the approach Heere et al., 2007, drew from).

The Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) proposed by Funk and James (2001) offers another approach, proposing that attitude development is a dynamic, evolving process.

The PCM has been operationalised using a three-dimensional scale of involvement (i.e., pleasure, sign, and centrality; Beaton et al., 2009), which is used to categorise participants into four stages: (a) awareness, (b) attraction, (c) attachment, and (d) allegiance. This model categorises participants into the attachment and allegiance categories in which Funk and James (2001; 2006) argue social identification is internalised in the self-concept.

Researchers have employed the SIA as a theoretical framework to explore distinct influences of fans' personal and social identities. Notably, Reysen and Branscombe (2010) distinguished between fanship and fandom (Reysen et al., 2017a, 2022a, 2022b). Based on a traditionalistic understanding of team identification, *fanship* is defined as “the extent that a fan feels psychologically connected to a team” (Wann, 1996, p.331). Conversely, *fandom* refers to the connection people establish with the broader fan group. It mirrors “that part of the individuals' self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group/s together with the value and emotional significance of that membership” (Tajfel, 1981, p. 255). In more simplistic terms, fanship refers to an individual connection to a team or club (i.e., personal identity), and fandom captures one's sense of fellowship with other fans and the broader community of the team (i.e., social identity) (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010).

Fanship mirrors Wann's (1996) conceptualisation of team identification. As such, it is a highly researched construct, as mentioned previously (Delia & James, 2018; Inoue et al, 2015, 2017, 2022; Lock et al., 2012; Lock & Heere, 2017). For example, Lock and colleagues (2012) demonstrated that identification with a team is an evolving process moving from external motivation to internalised commitment, shaped by direct experiences, player recognition, media engagement, and advocacy—each reinforcing personal and social alignment with the team. On the contrary, social identification with the broader fan community has been explored less frequently. Yoshida and colleagues (2015a) found a

positive influence of fan community identification on team brand value and several community-related outcomes, such as active engagement, personalised product adoption, a sense of member duty, and favourable word-of-mouth promotion. Different forms of pride were also found to have positive direct and indirect (through prestige and distinctiveness dimensions) effects on team and fan community identification and related processes (Gordon et al., 2021). Researchers have used a range of labels for the connection between fans, including: fan community identity (Gordon et al., 2021; Yoshida et al. 2015a, 2015b), sense of community (Yoshida et al., 2018), fan community attachment (Yoshida et al., 2015c), and fandom (Reysen et al., 2017a, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c; Reysen & Branscombe, 2010). For consistency with Reysen's work, we use the label 'fandom' to refer to individuals' social identification with their team's fan community.

Adopting social identity theory, Reysen and Branscombe (2010) compared samples of fans with various interests, which included: sport, music, media, and hobbies. They developed a new measure of fanship, finding a correlation between fanship and fandom in each context. Moreover, through a principal components analysis, Reysen and Branscombe tested the distinction between fanship and fandom, observing that items in their measures fitted adequately in two distinct factors representing fanship and fandom (in Study 4). The strength of the association between fandom and fanship led Plante et al. (2020) to explore the distinctiveness of the two constructs; they found that fanship tends to be more positively associated with measures of elitism than fandom.

Other studies have investigated the associations that fanship and fandom have with fans' well-being (e.g., psychological, self-esteem, happiness), providing equivocal results (Reysen et al., 2017, 2022a, 2022b; Reysen & Branscombe, 2010). While Reysen and Branscombe (2010) found that fanship and fandom were positively correlated with happiness, Reysen et al. (2022b) more recently found only fandom to display a significant association

with well-being through the mediation of friendship volume (in Study 1) and participation in social activities (in Studies 2 & 3). Furthermore, research highlighted that experiencing eudaimonic values while watching sport events may not directly influence overall well-being (Kim et al., 2017). Yet, the impact varied depending on one's level of sport fanship: Individuals with higher levels of fanship experienced greater fulfillment of eudaimonic needs and stronger well-being effects (Kim et al., 2017).

Focusing on the importance of a specific identity in the self-concept, Shuv-Ami and Toder Alon (2023) conceptualised and validated the Fan Social–Personal Identity Saliency (FSPIS) scale based on the SIA. The FSPIS captures the mixed and simultaneous magnitudes of personal and social identity strength. Shuv-Ami and Toder Alon (2023) found a moderate correlation between personal and social identification, highlighting a statistically significant relationship between the two constructs. In the context of professional Israeli football, Toder Alon et al. (2022) investigated the discrepancies between personal and social identification strength in predicting positive and negative aspects of being a fan. Their findings underlined that social identity strength was indicative of positive (e.g. loyalty) and negative outcomes (e.g. perception of fan aggression appropriateness), while personal identity strength was associated with less negative acts (Toder Alon et al., 2022).

In sum, the literature indicates that fanship and fandom are correlated, but they capture different aspects of fans' identification with sporting teams. Since traditional team identification research does not distinguish between fanship and fandom, Reysen et al.' approach (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010; Reysen et al., 2022a; 2022b) to conceptualising fanship and fandom is particularly well-suited for capturing and researching the related complexity of these forms of identification. Unlike other approaches, this recognises that identification is not solely an emotional or cognitive process but also shaped by social belonging and the fan's role within a community. This social aspect makes the theoretical

approach applicable across different sports and fan cultures. By incorporating the SIA, it is possible to capture the nuanced ways in which fans derive meaning from their psychological connection with a team and fan community. Accordingly, we explore the association between these two constructs in hypothesis 1:

**H1:** Fanship and fandom are two distinct yet correlated constructs.

### **The associations between fanship, fandom and subjective well-being**

Figure 1 depicts the hypothesised structural relationships that build on the proposition that fanship and fandom are distinct constructs. Specifically, we define fanship as personal identification with a team, and fandom as in-group membership and social interconnectedness. In addition, we define SWB as “people’s evaluations of their lives—evaluations that are both affective and cognitive” (Diener 2000, p.34), capturing hedonic, eudaimonic and social domains (Lui & Fernando, 2018).

Building on these definitions, we explain the link between fanship, fandom, and SWB based on the SIA to health and well-being (Haslam et al., 2009; Inoue et al., 2022; Jetten et al., 2014, 2017). There is evidence that when a social identity is internalised and meaningful in a person’s self-concept, group membership provides individuals with self-esteem enhancement, purpose in life, control, and efficacy (Jetten et al., 2017). Moreover, Haslam et al. (2009) argued that salient social identities can help people gain access to coping resources in the face of mental or physical stress, which include social support from other group members. Simply put, the social groups with which a person identifies have the potential to act as ‘social cures’ by granting group members access to social and psychological resources that promote well-being (Inoue et al., 2022; Jetten et al., 2014, 2017).

Concerning the link between fanship and SWB, researchers have proposed that identifying with a team positively correlates with various well-being outcomes (Branscombe & Wann, 1991; Inoue et al., 2015, 2017, 2022; Wann, 2006; Wann et al., 2017). Branscombe

and Wann (1991) found that fanship stimulated feelings of belongingness and heightened self-esteem. Subsequent investigations confirmed these results, highlighting fanship has a positive association with psychological (eudaimonic) and social well-being, as well as positive emotional (hedonic) states (Inoue et al., 2015; Wann et al., 1999; Wann & Pierce, 2005). We therefore hypothesise that:

**H2a:** Fanship is positively associated with SWB.

In line with the health benefits of social identification (Haslam et al., 2009; Jetten et al., 2014, 2017), existing literature indicates a positive association between fandom and fans' well-being (Reysen et al., 2017a, 2022a, 2022b). Reysen et al. (2022a, 2022b) investigated both fandom and fanship as predictors of fans' psychological well-being, defined as "perception of engagement with existential challenges of life" (Keyes et al., 2002, p. 1007). Their findings showed that fandom had a stronger relationship with psychological well-being than fanship (Reysen et al., 2022a, 2022b). In addition, fandom was found to be positively associated with self-esteem (Reysen et al., 2022a). In all these studies, the relationship between fandom and different forms of well-being was established by (a) social activities, (b) intragroup helping or (c) friendship volume (Reysen et al., 2022a, 2022b). This supports the assumption that social interactions enable the efficient dynamic between social identification and psychosocial benefits (Haslam et al., 2009; Jetten et al., 2017; Wann, 2006). Fandom directly captures a person's social identification with the broader fan community (Reysen et al., 2022b). Hence, our next hypothesis is:

**H2b:** Fandom is positively associated with SWB, and this association is stronger than the association between fanship and SWB.

### **The relationships between fanship, fandom and attitudinal loyalty**

When individuals identify with a group, they are expected to express and exhibit consistent group loyalty, particularly under perceived external threat to the group's social

identity (Ellemers et al., 2002; Van Vugt & Hart, 2004). The SIA posits that in the face of identity threats—possibly arising from negative group outcomes (Turner et al., 1984)—high identifiers express high levels of group cohesiveness, attraction and ultimately loyalty.

Loyalty is a multifaceted and complex construct that has been theorised in terms of behavioural and attitudinal dimensions (Day, 1969). Of them, we focus on attitudinal team loyalty, which refers to the outcome of the interactions between external pressures to change and mature attitudes toward a team. It is featured by (a) choice persistence, (b) resistance to change, (c) cognitive processing biases towards the choice, and (d) behavioural model (Heere & Dickinson, 2008).

At the individual level, research has highlighted the stability and persistence of identification with a beloved team (Lock et al., 2014) and its positive association with attitudinal loyalty (Matsuoka et al., 2003; Stevens & Rosenberger, 2012). Investigating Australian rugby league fans, Stevens and Rosenberg (2012) observed team identification (i.e., fanship) to be a better predictor of team loyalty than sport and team involvement. Furthermore, fanship was found to be negatively associated with changes in fans' behaviours (Harada & Matsuoka, 1999), indicating that individuals with stronger fanship tend to remain loyal to their team. Thus, we hypothesise that:

**H3a:** Fanship is positively associated with attitudinal loyalty.

Ellemers et al. (2002) argued that high identifiers face the fear of being excluded from their group (or potentially excluded in the future). As such, they are expected to react to this fear by (a) perceiving higher ingroup homogeneity, (b) accepting (or not accepting) a more peripheral group position, or (c) displaying group prototypical behaviours, particularly in social occasions. This last consideration relates to the existence of a tacit 'nonabandonment' rule "which conveys that once people become involved in a group, they must show their loyalty, especially when the group most needs it—in the presence of an attractive exit" (Van

Vugt & Hart, 2004, p. 588). As groups hold normative attributes, the SIA posits individuals who strongly identify with their groups are more influenced by group-induced norms than low-identifiers (Smith et al., 2007; Terry & Hogg, 1996). High identifiers have a greater tendency to remain loyal to their groups as they are more positively and favourably biased towards fellow ingroup members (Van Vugt & Hart, 2004). In team identification research, it has been demonstrated that high identifiers with the fan community show more elevated degrees of loyal behaviours and intentions toward the beloved team rather than low identifiers (Yoshida et al., 2015a, 2015b). This leads to our next hypothesis:

**H3b:** Fandom is positively associated with attitudinal loyalty.

### **SWB mediating the associations between fanship, fandom and attitudinal loyalty**

SWB is composed of several components, including positive affect, low level of negative affect and satisfaction with important life domains (Diener, 2000). Life satisfaction, satisfaction with physical and financial conditions, and satisfaction with needs fulfilment are considered crucial sub-elements of SWB (Diener, 2000; Inoue et al., 2017, 2020; Lui & Fernando, 2018).

Relationship marketing research reveals that fanship predicts loyal intentions towards a team and high identifiers are less affected by satisfaction with (a) game score, (b) performance quality and (c) contest excellence, than low identifiers (Matsuoka et al., 2003). Nevertheless, the combination of fanship and satisfaction with a team appears to predict loyalty more intensely than fanship alone (Matsuoka et al., 2003). Focusing on consumers, Bodet and Bernache-Assollant (2011) provide empirical support for a model in which customer satisfaction with a team brand positively predicts fanship which in turn positively and directly affects attitudinal loyalty to a team. Also in consumer research, being satisfied with service and product experiences is considered an essential part of consumers' SWB (Lee

et al., 2002). Therefore, we expect that the previous findings can be extended to and mirrored by overall SWB construct. We hypothesise that:

**H3c:** SWB positively mediates the relationship between fanship and attitudinal loyalty.

Furthermore, based on the SIA research on health and well-being, individuals with strong social identification are expected to receive positive feelings from group membership because it confers access to social and psychological resources that enable them to cope with stressful or disadvantageous situations (Haslam et al., 2009; Jetten et al., 2017). At the same time, because stronger social identification is internalised in the self-concept, health-oriented group norms are expected to be more pervasive leading to sustained group membership and engagement in group activities (Jetten et al., 2017). Accordingly, we predict that social identification (i.e., fandom) has the potential to enhance individuals' SWB (Jetten et al., 2017) which, in turn, may positively affect identified fans' attitudinal loyalty. Accordingly, we posit that:

**H3d:** SWB positively mediates the relationship between fandom and attitudinal loyalty.

### **The moderating role of emotional attachment**

The SIA posits emotions are elements of internalised group identities (Tajfel, 1982). In some empirical cases (Hinkle et al., 1989; Karasawa, 1991), the affective dimension of identity was found to be more influential than its cognitive counterpart in strengthening social identification. This phenomenon appears to occur when group membership is meaningful to a person and deeply rooted in the self (Tajfel, 1982). Researchers have investigated the relationships between team identification and discrete emotions (Biscaia et al., 2012; Prayag et al., 2020), and emotional support (Inoue et al., 2015, 2020, 2022; Katz et al., 2020). However, although there have been SIA-based conceptualisations and studies concerning

emotional attachment (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Paxton & Moody, 2003), prior research has not clarified how emotional attachment interacts with fanship or fandom.

Emotional attachment is rooted in Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory, which focused on the bonds formed between infants and caregivers and has been extended to adult relationships. Emotional attachment refers to "an emotion-laden target-specific bond between a person and a specific object" (Bowlby, 1969, p. 87–88). According to consumer research, while identification exhibits cognitive and evaluative connotations before encompassing the related affective meanings, attachment tends to capture the degree of emotional bond consumers have with consumptive objects (Ladhari et al., 2022; Sen et al., 2015). Thus, identification and attachment are complementary constructs that enable deeper understanding of consumer-organisation connections (Sen et al., 2015). Foundational work by Ball and Tasaki (1982) established the importance of emotional attachment in consumer relationships, demonstrating that stronger emotional bonds can lead to increased loyalty and reduced switching behaviours. Similarly, Park et al. (2010) highlighted the role of emotional attachment in consumer decision-making, showing that consumers who feel emotionally attached to a brand are more likely to exhibit loyalty and advocacy. Thomson et al. (2005) developed an original measure of emotional attachment, which quantifies perceptions of affection, passion and connection. While effective for capturing general sentiments, Thomson et al.'s scale may not fully encompass the intricacies of emotional experiences associated with brand relationships (Jimenez & Voss, 2014). To address these limitations, Jimenez and Voss (2014) proposed an alternative measurement framework that integrates qualitative insights with quantitative assessments. Jimenez and Voss's scale reflects the high degree of abstraction featuring the construct and aims at capturing the extent of emotional attachment and not the behaviours related to it.

Experimental methods have also been utilised to explore emotional attachment, providing a dynamic approach to measuring consumer responses. For instance, researchers have employed priming techniques to evoke specific emotions prior to brand evaluations, demonstrating that emotional stimuli are associated with attachment levels and subsequent consumer behaviour (Murray & Rethans, 2018).

To operationalise emotional attachment, we focus on individual-level emotional attachment, in response to calls for further research on how this construct interacts with identification (Dwyer et al., 2015). At the individual level, emotional attachment refers to the sum of what fans cognitively invest in terms of bonding and passion (i.e., investment) and the corresponding emotional value received from supporting a team. It consists of energisation, happiness, delight and emotionality (i.e., dividend) (Dwyer et al., 2015). Although consumers may identify with a brand without an emotional attachment (Sen et al., 2015), there is evidence from fans of new teams that the emotional significance of identification develops as knowledge of a team and its players forms in memory (Lock et al., 2012). Furthermore, this can develop into a long-lasting emotional attachment to a team (Dwyer et al., 2015; Sen et al., 2015). Specifically, through long term direct experience, fans who individually identify with a team create an emotional attachment towards the team (Dwyer et al., 2015; Lock et al., 2012) which affects perceived satisfaction (Paxton & Moody, 2003). As team-oriented cognitive investment and emotional dividend increase in magnitude, identified fans perceive a sense of protection and security from team-induced positive emotions (Sen et al., 2015; Thomson et al., 2005) and higher satisfaction (Ladhari et al., 2022). Ultimately, emotional attachment to a team has the capacity to strengthen the relationship between personal identification with the team and the relative psychological benefits (Lee et al., 2002; Sato et al., 2023). Building on this evidence, we expect emotional attachment to strengthen the relationship between fanship and SWB. This argument also aligns with SIA-based

conceptualisations in which emotional value is present in group memberships that are internalised and meaningful to a person (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Accordingly, as a fan's emotional attachment increases, the relationship between fandom and SWB is expected to intensify. We therefore hypothesise as follows:

**H4a:** Emotional attachment positively moderates the associations between fanship and SWB, and between fandom and SWB.

There is evidence highlighting that football fans' emotional attachment to a team brand has a positive association with their attitudinal loyalty (Park et al., 2010) and resistance to change (Lehmann et al., 2008). Likewise, Hallberg (2003) observed that emotional attachment was a significant predictor of brand loyalty. Similar results emerged in a recent investigation of Canadian hockey fans' emotional attachment to a team brand (Ladhari et al., 2022). Since fanship is also positively correlated with attitudinal loyalty, even in the absence of satisfaction with the team performance (Matsuoka et al., 2003), existing evidence suggests that the interaction between fanship and emotional attachment can strengthen attitudinal loyalty. Indeed, we would expect identified fans who emotionally invest to display behavioural loyalty towards the team. Furthermore, the SIA posits that as social identification and emotional attachment increase, members are more likely to engage in group participation and activities (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000). The emotions attached to identification and participation (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Paxton & Moody, 2003) have the theoretical potential to positively moderate the relationship between fandom and attitudinal loyalty. Therefore:

**H4b:** Emotional attachment positively moderates the associations between fanship and attitudinal loyalty, and between fandom and attitudinal loyalty.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants and procedures**

Data were collected by conducting a cross-sectional survey targeting adult fans of S.S. Lazio and A.S. Roma football clubs. It was required that participants were self-described fans of the clubs, and their ages ranged from 18 to 85 years old. The questionnaire was distributed in on-site and online data collection settings. The on-site setting was based on a direct, in person approach and completion of the online questionnaire by participants outside the Stadio Olimpico (Olympic Stadium, the home stadium of both teams) before home games of both teams (see Table 1). On-site participants completed the survey on their mobile phones after having scanned a QR code provided by the research team before entering home venue gates. For the on-site setting, we gathered data from fans experiencing the live game atmosphere while alleviating potential (positive or negative) in-game or post-game result biases. We distributed online questionnaire links in three ways: (a) among official S.S. Lazio/A.S. Roma fan club members through official contacts; (b) physical public flyers and posters positioned in various spots across the Stadio Olimpico park and within local university facilities; and (c) posting on unofficial S.S. Lazio/A.S. Roma Facebook private fan groups. For the on-site setting and the use of posters and flyers, a shared QR code enabled digital access to the questionnaire.

In total, 604 fans participated in the study. Thirty surveys were removed because of missing responses, and three more were removed for low engagement rate (i.e., standard deviation across answers was lower than 0.30) (Nisar et al., 2020). The final sample included 571 fans, of which 213 were recruited on-site, and 358 completed the questionnaire online. The mean age of the final sample was 37 years (SD = 6.2, range 18–82). In terms of gender diversity (i.e., Delia et al., 2022), 29.9% of the sample were women, 69.4% were men, and four participants did not disclose their gender. Overall, 49.9% of survey participants were full-time employees; 45.9% held a secondary school certificate/diploma; 86.3 % were

residents within Roman metropolitan area; 61.6% practiced amateur sporting activities; and 55% were A.S. Roma supporters and 45% were S.S. Lazio fans.

## Measures

All survey items were rated on a seven-point-Likert scale ranging from “1 – strongly disagree” to “7 – strongly agree” (see Table 2). *Fanship* was measured with three items (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .92$ ) from the original Fanship scale (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010). This scale was developed as a measure of individual connection to fan’s interest-object (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010). Fanship or team identification has been measured with other unidimensional measures, including the SSIS (Wann & Branscombe, 1993) and the TII (Trail & James, 2001), as well as multidimensional measures, including the Team\*ID scale (Heere & James, 2007) and Dimmock et al.’s (2005) team identification scale. We opted to use the Fanship scale, as the scale was specifically developed in distinction to fandom and showed discriminant validity when it was measured with fandom in the same model (Plante et al., 2020). This 3-items reduced version of the Fanship scale has been commonly used in fanship and fandom research (Plante et al., 2020; Reysen et al., 2017b,  $\alpha = .91$ ; Reysen et al., 2022b,  $\alpha = .93$ ).

We used three items from the social identification scale (Doosje et al., 1995) to measure *fandom* ( $\alpha = .92$ ), in line with previous work (Cassidy et al., 2014; Reysen et al., 2013, 2017, 2022b). In addition, we used four items from the Attitudinal Loyalty to Team Scale (ALTS) (Heere & Dickson, 2008) ( $\alpha = .92$ ), which replicated past studies (Dwyer, 2011; Tachis & Tzetzis, 2015; White et al., 2023).

Concerning *SWB*, we used 17 items from the Well-Being Scale (WeBS) (Lui & Fernando, 2018), which provided high reliability ( $\alpha = .96$ ). Although this scale has not been used in prior team identification research, it showed consistent reliability and construct validity for overall and dimension-specific SWB in health studies (Abdul Kadir et al., 2021,  $\alpha$

=.92; Lamarche et al., 2021,  $\alpha = .95$ ; Krzyzanowski et al., 2021). Accordingly, the WeBS constitutes a “valid measure of multiple aspects of well-being” (Abdul Kadir et al., 2021 p.3). While this scale is originally composed of 29 items and 5 sub-domains (including financial and physical well-being), we decided to focus on the social, eudemonic and hedonic dimensions of fans’ SWB, which are more relevant to the psychological benefits of team sport consumption (Inoue et al., 2020; Wann, 2006).

Finally, regarding *emotional attachment*, a wide variety of psychometric measures exist which mirrors the plethora of definitions of the construct (Jimenez & Voss, 2014). Park et al. (2010) developed an emotional attachment scale which is more connected to the concept of brand and measuring brand self-connection and brand prominence. Thomson et al. (2005) provided a first psychometrically oriented instrument to evaluate the degree of specific emotions and feelings. Jimenez and Voss’s (2014) Emotional Attachment Scale (2014) was another well-established measure, but it does not refer to specific emotions. While acknowledging the potential utility of these scales, in line with our purpose and definition of emotional attachment discussed above, we opted to use the Emotional Attachment to Sport Team Scale (EAST; Dwyer et al., 2015) for two reasons. First, the scale was developed in the sports marketing field with the practical aim of capturing the magnitude of specific emotions (and not context- or object-specific behaviours) related to the team, which is the specific focus of our study. Second, Dwyer et al. (2015) highlighted the interaction between emotional attachment—as measured by the EAST—and identification as a future line of research.

### **Back translation**

We developed all scales and items in English. After adapting the items to the research setting, the questionnaire was translated to Italian using a back translation process (Brislin, 1970). Accordingly, two bilingual authors produced English-to-Italian and Italian-to-English

translations of the questionnaire. Next, a native English speaker assessed discrepancies and similarities between the original and back translated versions. Since we did not find significant differences, the English and Italian questionnaires were considered equivalent. This process was deemed coherent and suitable in previous sports management and marketing studies (e.g., Yoshida et al., 2015a, 2023).

## **Analysis and Results**

### **Measurement model**

We observed significant skewness and kurtosis in the distribution of our indicators of latent factors, except for Fandom indicators. The skewness values ranged between +/- 2.3, while the Kurtosis values ranged from positive to negative 5. These results fall within the broader rules for normality suggested by Kline (2011). Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed via IBM AMOS 29 by including all the multi-item scales described above. The model fit indices from the CFA were acceptable ( $\chi^2 / df = 1778.32/512 = 3.47$ , CFI = .94, SRMR = .05, RMSEA = .07). As presented in Table 3, convergent validity across all measures were confirmed as construct reliability coefficients were .92 or above (threshold is > .70) and average variance extracted (AVE) values were .74 or above (threshold is > .50) for all latent constructs (Hair et al., 2021). The square root of each AVE was higher than each pair of correlation coefficients, which supported discriminant validity among constructs (MacKenzie et al., 2011).

We conducted Cook's distance analysis (outliers have scores > 1.00), which indicated there were no multivariate outliers. To check for multicollinearity, we produced variable inflation factors (VIFs) for the relationships tested. No VIFs were greater than 2, which is below the threshold of 10 (O'Brien, 2007). Finally, we ran a common method bias test using a common latent factor approach (Serrano Archimi et al., 2018). The chi-square difference test between zero-constrained and unconstrained models was significant ( $\Delta\chi^2 (\Delta df = 36) = 278.21$ ,

$p < .001$ ). Accordingly, we retained the common latent factor for the structural analyses, in line with previous research (Serrano Archimi et al., 2018). We did not present the common latent factor in the visual representation of the model (Figure 1 and 2) for clearer presentation.

### **Structural model**

We tested the structural model shown in Figure 2. The goodness-of-fit indices ( $\chi^2 / df = 3.68$ , CFI= 0.931, RMSEA = 0.069, SRMR = 0.503) were acceptable (MacKenzie et al., 2011). H1 proposed that fanship and fandom are distinct yet correlating constructs. First, no convergent validity issues were observed for each of the two constructs. Concerning discriminant validity, the AVE values of both scales were greater than the square of their correlation (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), and the correlation between constructs (.842) was lower than the .950 threshold for testing empirical redundancy and random error effect (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). In line with MacKenzie et al. (2011), we fixed the covariance of fanship and fandom to 1.0. Next, we conducted a chi-square difference test which confirmed that the constrained model (with the covariance constrained to 1.0) performed significantly worse than the original hypothesised model which allowed fanship and fandom to freely correlate (see Table 4). As such, H1 was supported.

H2a hypothesised that fanship was positively associated with SWB. The model findings indicated that this relationship was nonsignificant ( $\beta = .079$ ,  $p = .501$ ). Accordingly, H2a was not supported. H2b hypothesised that fandom is positively associated with SWB. The structural model revealed that this relationship was positive and significant ( $\beta = .226$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Given the positive association between fanship and SWB, H2b was supported.

Table 5 shows the results concerning H3 and H4. There was a positive and significant relationship between fanship (and not fandom) and attitudinal loyalty ( $\beta = .684$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Accordingly, H3a is supported, while H3b is rejected. Furthermore, SWB had a positive

mediating effect on the relationship between fandom (and not fanship) and attitudinal loyalty ( $\beta = .047$ , lower value  $.007$ , upper value  $.124$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Thus, H3c is rejected while H3d is retained. There was also a positive and significant association between SWB and attitudinal loyalty ( $\beta = .230$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Our moderation analysis revealed that emotional attachment had a significant negative moderating effect on the paths from fanship to SWB ( $\beta = -.229$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and fandom to attitudinal loyalty ( $\beta = -.257$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In both cases, individuals with high emotional attachment reported elevated levels of SWB and attitudinal loyalty when their identification was low (see Figures 3 and 4). Nevertheless, both H4a and H4b are rejected.

### **Discussion**

The aims of this study were to: (a) compare the relative associations that fanship and fandom had with SWB and attitudinal loyalty; (b) observe the mediating role of SWB in the associations between fanship, fandom, and attitudinal loyalty; and (c) explore the moderating effects of fans' emotional attachment to the team. While previous research has focused on the relationships between individual or group-based discrete emotions and fanship (Campo et al., 2019; Gordon et al., 2021; Prayag et al., 2020), this work answered calls for further exploration of individual-level emotional attachment (Dwyer et al., 2015) in relation to fanship and fandom (Reysen et al., 2022b). Our results have four theoretical implications.

#### **Theoretical implications**

First, we have demonstrated that when combined with elevated levels of fanship or fandom, high degrees of emotional attachment can reduce the associations between fanship and SWB, and fandom and attitudinal loyalty. In addition, when identification was low, emotional attachment was associated with elevated levels of SWB and attitudinal loyalty, confirming the centrality of affective attachment. From a social identity perspective, high values of the emotional dimension of identification, in conjunction with high degrees of

either fanship or fandom, appeared to burden the football fans we sampled. Our results indicated that having elevated degrees of both emotional attachment and personal identification can reduce the satisfaction and happiness individuals might experience from their identification. Moreover, when emotionally and strongly attached to the team, high identifiers with the broader fan community may display reduced attitudinal loyalty towards the team.

Second, our results support the idea that, in the case of high degrees of fandom, SWB has a positive relationship with attitudinal loyalty. We found that SWB positively mediated the relationships between fandom and attitudinal loyalty. At the group identity level, our findings align with social identity research concerning health and well-being, in particular when considering that group membership (a) increases self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and (b) provides social and psychological resources to cope with stressors, identity threats, and disadvantageous situations (Haslam et al., 2009; Jetten et al., 1997, 2014; Turner et al., 1984). In line with previous research, interpersonal interconnections enhanced by supporting a favourite team appeared to stimulate the relationship between fandom and SWB (Reysen et al., 2017a, 2022b), thus explaining the mediating role of SWB in the model.

Third, while socially identifying with other fans and the broader fan community was positively associated with SWB, we found that personally identifying with the team/club has a positive association with attitudinal loyalty. In aggregate terms, these results are in line with previous arguments that: (a) fanship are predominantly associated with measures and constructs related to sport consumption (Reysen et al, 2022b), and (b) well-being is more strongly influenced by fandom than fanship (Reysen et al., 2022a, 2022b).

Finally, while stress and hostile activities can negatively influence emotional attachment dynamics (Paxton & Moody, 2003), emotional attachment is deemed to be affected by organisations' past glory and history (Gordon et al., 2021; Paxton & Moody,

2003). Although both studied clubs are historically important in Italian football, their successes at both the national and international levels are limited when compared to their rivals (e.g., F.C. Juventus, F.C. Inter Milan, A.C. Milan). The limited historical success of each club might negatively affect the relationships that fanship and fandom have with emotional attachment, and with the other outcomes we tested (Gordon et al., 2021; Paxton & Moody, 2003).

### **Practical implications**

Marketers and managers can benefit from this research, particularly in terms of considering emotional attachment and well-being. Our underlying argument is that emotional attachment should not overwhelm the other components of identification, specifically when an individual strongly identifies with a team or fellow fans. First, anticipating consumers' emotional attachment and well-being states might be beneficial for sport industry professionals and organisations (Kim & Kim, 2023; Prayag et al., 2020). Therefore, researching and collecting data on the emotional attachment and well-being of their fans—using measures adopted in this study or other scales—might enable clubs to gain an in-depth picture of identified fans who follow them. This appears highly important as our findings indicated the need for clubs and sports organisations to consider fans as key emotional stakeholders (Senaux, 2008; Zagnoli & Radicchi, 2010). As fans are unable to regulate the affective dimension of their identification with the team and with other fans, identification might negatively influence fans' well-being, which could, in turn, reduce their loyal attitudes and behaviours. In order to avoid this, organisations and clubs might support peer-led initiatives and work closely with their official fan clubs and sub-groups to foster a culture of emotional regulation. Specifically, club could search for and identify prototypical emotional leaders among fans, such as recognised in-group members who are recognised as role models in response to specific crisis (Inoue et al., 2020). By analysing the general spectrum of team

fans and specific sub-groups, clubs might interact and empower prototypical fan leaders performing as informal regulators and set the tone for others. Thus, while stimulating the co-creation of fan communities, organisations can stimulate occasions—both in presence and online—peer fans-led dialogues about how to support the team while maintaining control over emotions as well as and help them spread the word about emotional relief and education. This might be crucially effective particularly in those male-dominated sports contexts—like football—since men (especially young ones) tend to stigmatise emotional expression, discouraging individuals from seeking social or emotional support when dealing with stress or mental health challenges (Hillard et al., 2019). This is due to broader societal norms regarding masculinity and sports culture which clubs and leagues are expected to attempt at tackling.

At the systemic level, clubs, institutions, and leagues can promote healthy competition narratives shaping rivalries in a positive way, emphasising respect and tradition rather than hatred and hostility. Media, club announcements, and player interviews should promote sportspersonship over disrespect as well as promoting shared nostalgia. Also, leagues might promote a shared vision and responsibility to support emotional regulation of fans through joint initiatives or agreements between rival clubs.

Moreover, through official communications, ads, and marketing strategies, clubs may suggest positive approaches and best practices to channel and smooth potential overwhelming emotional attachment to the team. Additionally, club-oriented emotional relief and regulation might occur through social interactions with other identified club fans in physical spaces, events, and online platforms. Whether in person or online, these occasions might be still monitored and led by psychologists and counsellors. Specific staff members might be charged by clubs to monitor and assist fans emotional response on social media. Venting has been recognised as a strategy to cope with negative emotional pressure (Kim & Kim, 2023). This

might occur in ad-hoc structures and through specific activities managed by clubs.

Complementarily, some fans may need relaxation over venting. Accordingly, clubs can provide calm and safe spaces at sporting venues, giving fans the opportunity to take a break from the noise and stimulation of the competition if they need to. Creating a balanced environment helps fans manage stress and enjoy the game without feeling overwhelmed. Some of these strategies are already in use in different leagues and clubs, and they can be considered highly fruitful for enhancing the balance between fans' identification and emotional attachment.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Despite the theoretical and practical implications, limits to the current study should be acknowledged. To begin, the negative and nonsignificant moderating effect of emotional attachment might be explained by the individualistic conceptualisation of emotional attachment we used (Dwyer et al., 2015). This nuance is reflected in the instrument we employed. Given the adoption of the SIA as our theoretical framework, a group-based understanding of emotions may have yielded different findings.

Second, the focus on fanship and fandom did not allow us to analyse different categories of sports fans concerning the proposed model, such as local versus displaced fans (Lintumaeki & Koll, 2023), season ticket holders versus other segments of purchase category (e.g. single-game attendees) (Zagnoli & Radicchi, 2010) and the typology of temporary, local, devoted, fanatical, and dysfunctional fans (Hunt et al., 1999). As diverse types of sport consumers (and fans) hold different degrees of emotional significance attached to the team (Hunt et al., 1999)—and potentially different behaviours, future research might investigate the discrepancies among groups in relation to the two forms of identification.

Furthermore, although fanship appears to remain stable across times and game results (Doyle et al., 2017; Lock et al., 2014), perceptions of emotional attachment may be affected

by specific sporting results and different trends throughout the season. Hence, a longitudinal analysis may add useful knowledge concerning fanship, fandom and the affective dimensions across seasonal time span and positive/negative performance trends.

It is also important to underline that our study intentionally investigated the association and not causality between involved constructs. Future research might investigate causal relationships in the model to strengthen highlighted results.

Additionally, we focused on the attitudinal dimension of loyalty, as it has been consistently studied in sport marketing and management research (Bodet & Bernache-Assollant, 2011; Day, 1969; Heere & Dickinson, 2008; Matsuoka et al., 2003; Toder Alon et al., 2022) and in team identification research (Bodet & Bernache-Assollant, 2011; Matsuoka et al., 2003). Nevertheless, analysing the interactions between different forms of identifications and emotional attachment might reveal differential effects on fans' well-being and loyalty. Thus, future research may consider assessing behavioural loyalty alongside attitudinal loyalty.

Furthermore, while passion is an indicator of emotional attachment investment (Dwyer et al., 2015) and is closely tied with identities and identification (Vallerand et al., 2003), our study did not examine this construct. According to Vallerand et al. (2003), while a person's harmonious passion is in balance with other life domains and identities, obsessive passion is invasive and takes a large share of a person's self, thus centralising resources. Obsessiveness takes place on a person's uninterrupted engagement and positive performance in a passionate activity since the same activity is crucial for the individual's perceptions of self-worth (Vallerand et al., 2003). In obsessive passion, engagement is performed even when the returns are negative as in the case of this study results (Vallerand et al., 2003). Italian football fans are well-known for their passion towards a team, and identifying with a team or a fan community borders on religious devotion for many (Billings et al., 2022; Statz et al.,

2022). As football culture monopolises the overall share of sport fans' identities, the Italian sociocultural environment might encourage obsessive passions. Future research may explore the interacting dynamics between fanship, fandom and passion.

Finally, the teams and fans examined in this study belonged to a similar sociocultural background—they were from the same city—and have witnessed similar sporting results throughout their history. Accordingly, future research might compare our results with data obtained in relation to other football teams and different team sports in varying sociocultural contexts.

### **Conclusions**

Identifying with a team or group of fans can have a significant emotional dimension (Biscaia et al., 2012; Prayag et al., 2020; Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Therefore, understanding how emotional attachment can affect fanship and fandom is fundamental to augment future research and managerial strategies (Dwyer et al., 2015). The current research underlines the potential negative side of elevated emotional attachment. Specifically, our findings demonstrate that high emotional attachment conditions uncover reduced SWB for high identifiers with the team (fanship) as well as low attitudinal loyalty for high identifiers with fellow fans (fandom). Furthermore, fandom is positively associated with perceptions of SWB. In turn, SWB displayed a positive association with attitudinal loyalty. For the first time, we have demonstrated the interacting roles of emotional attachment with the team and team identification (Dwyer et al., 2015). Finally, the current research extends academic knowledge concerning the distinction between fanship and fandom (Reysen et al., 2022b; Reysen & Branscombe, 2010) as well as social identity research on health and well-being (Haslam et al., 2009; Jetten et al., 2017). Managers and marketers can benefit from this study by employing a strategic approach that promotes an educative role of clubs and institutions and integrates emotional regulation initiatives.

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**Table 1. On-site data collection events and surveys collected.**

Date	Time	Game	Championship	Survey participants
05/03/2023	20.45	Roma - Juventus	Serie A	3
07/03/2023	18.45	Lazio – AZ	UEFA Conference League	25
09/03/2023	18.45	Roma - Real Sociedad	UEFA Conference League	22
12/03/2023	18.00	Roma - Sassuolo	Serie A	5
19/03/2023	18.00	Lazio - Roma	Serie A	2
02/04/2023	18.00	Roma - Sampdoria	Serie A	4
08/04/2023	20.45	Lazio - Juventus	Serie A	10
16/04/2023	20.45	Roma - Udinese	Serie A	13
20/04/2023	21.00	Roma - Feyenoord	UEFA Conference League	20
22/04/2023	18.00	Lazio - Torino	Serie A	9
29/04/2023	18.00	Roma - Milan	Serie A	12
03/05/2023	21.00	Lazio - Sassuolo	Serie A	53
06/05/2023	18.00	Roma - Inter	Serie A	12
11/05/2023	21.00	Roma - Leverkusen	UEFA Conference League	10
12/05/2023	20.45	Lazio - Lecce	Serie A	9
22/05/2023	18.30	Roma - Salernitana	Serie A	11
27/05/2023	18.30	Lazio - Cremonese	Serie A	8

**Table 2. Survey: scale, items and Cronbach's Alpha**

Constructs	Cronbach's Alpha	Dimensions	Items
Fanship	.918	Unidimensional	<p>"I am emotionally connected as A.S. Roma/ S.S. Lazio."</p> <p>"I strongly identify with A.S. Roma/ S.S. Lazio."</p> <p>"A.S. Roma/ S.S. Lazio is part of me."</p>
Fandom	.919	Unidimensional	<p>"I strongly identify with other fans of A.S. Roma/ S.S. Lazio community."</p> <p>"I see myself as a member of A.S. Roma/ S.S. Lazio community."</p> <p>"I am glad to be part of A.S. Roma/ S.S. Lazio community."</p>
		Social	<p>"I have someone who knows me well to talk to when I have problems."</p> <p>"I know I can count on my friends and/or family in a time of crisis."</p> <p>"There is at least one person I know who loves me and/or needs me."</p> <p>"I enjoy spending time with friends and/or relatives."</p>
Subjective wellbeing	.959	Eudaimonic	<p>"I plan for the future."</p> <p>"I feel confident that I am able to solve most problems I face."</p> <p>"I get along with people in general."</p> <p>"I believe I have the potential to reach my goals."</p> <p>"I believe that I can make a difference in the lives of others."</p> <p>"Life has meaning for me."</p> <p>"I am satisfied with my spirituality."</p> <p>"I think I am as smart as, or smarter than, others."</p> <p>"I often do things that bring out my creative side."</p> <p>"I like engaging in stimulating conversations."</p>
		Hedonic	<p>"I try to do things that make me happy."</p> <p>"I feel happy often."</p> <p>"I enjoy life."</p>
Attitudinal loyalty	.918	Unidimensional	<p>"I would still be committed to A.S. Roma/ S.S. Lazio regardless of the lack of any star players."</p> <p>"I could never switch my loyalty from the A.S. Roma/ S.S. Lazio even if my close friends were fans of another team."</p>

			“I would still be committed to the A.S. Roma/ S.S. Lazio regardless of the lack of physical skill among the players.”
			“It would be difficult to change my beliefs about the A.S. Roma/ S.S. Lazio.”
		Investment	Attached*
			Bonded*
			Passionate*
Emotional attachment	.966	Dividend	Happy*
			Delighted*
			Emotional*
			Energised*

Notes. \* These items were inserted after “When I think of A.S. Roma/ S.S. Lazio, I feel. . .”; All items were measured on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 7 = Strongly Agree).

**Table 3. Construct reliability and Average Variance Extracted**

Construct	CR	AVE	MSV	MaxR (H)	EMA	FNP	ATL	SWB	FDM
EMA	0.974	0.95	0.739	0.974	0.975				
FNP	0.922	0.797	0.739	0.924	0.860***	0.893			
ATL	0.921	0.745	0.724	0.93	0.782***	0.851***	0.863		
SWB	0.952	0.868	0.41	1,015	0.571***	0.561***	0.640***	0.932	
FDM	0.924	0.802	0.708	0.948	0.691***	0.842***	0.711***	0.527***	0.896

Notes. CR: Composite Reliability; AVE: Average Variance Extracted; MSV: Maximum Shared Variance; MaxR (H): Maximal Reliability; EMA: Emotional Attachment; FNP: Fanship; ATL: Attitudinal Loyalty to the Team; SWB: Subjective Wellbeing; FDM: Fandom.

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

**Table 4. Fanship and fandom: discriminant validity chi-square difference test.**

Hypothesis	Model	$\chi^2$	<i>df</i>	Delta $\chi^2$ ( <i>df</i> )	Decision
	Unconstrained	1886.37	514	-	-
H1	FNP $\leftrightarrow$ FDM constrained	2196.48	515	310.11 (1) ***	Support

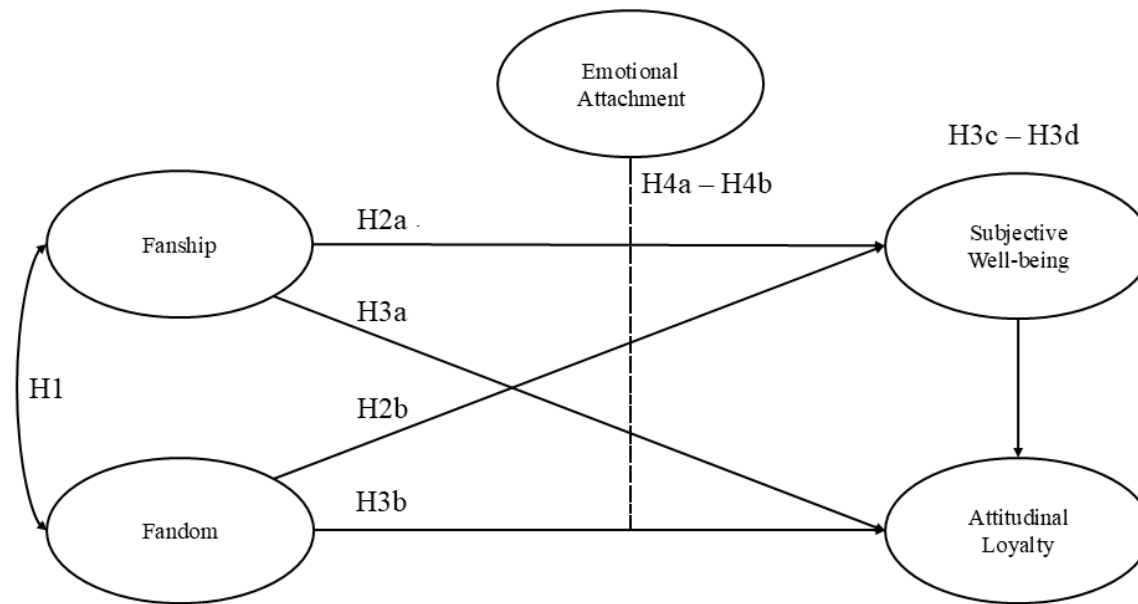
Notes. Critical value for Delta  $\chi^2$  with *df* = 1 is 10.83 at the .001 (\*\*\*)  $p < .001$ . FDM: Fandom; FNP: Fanship.

**Table 5. Fanship and fandom: discriminant validity chi-square difference test.**

Hypothesis	Paths	$\beta$	$B$	Lower	Upper	p-value	Decision
H3a	FNP→ATL	.684	-	-	-	***	Support
H3b	FDM→ATL	-.510	-	-	-	.373	No support
	SWB→ATL	.230	-	-	-	***	
H3c	FNP→SWB→ATL	-	.015	-.053	.082	.588	No support
H3d	FDM→SWB→ATL	-	.047	.007	.124	*	Support
H4a	EMA moderation FNP→SWB	-	-.229	-	-	***	No support
	FDM→SWB		-.053			.362	
H4b	EMA moderation FNP→ATL		.061	-	-	.188	No support
	FDM→ATL		.257			***	

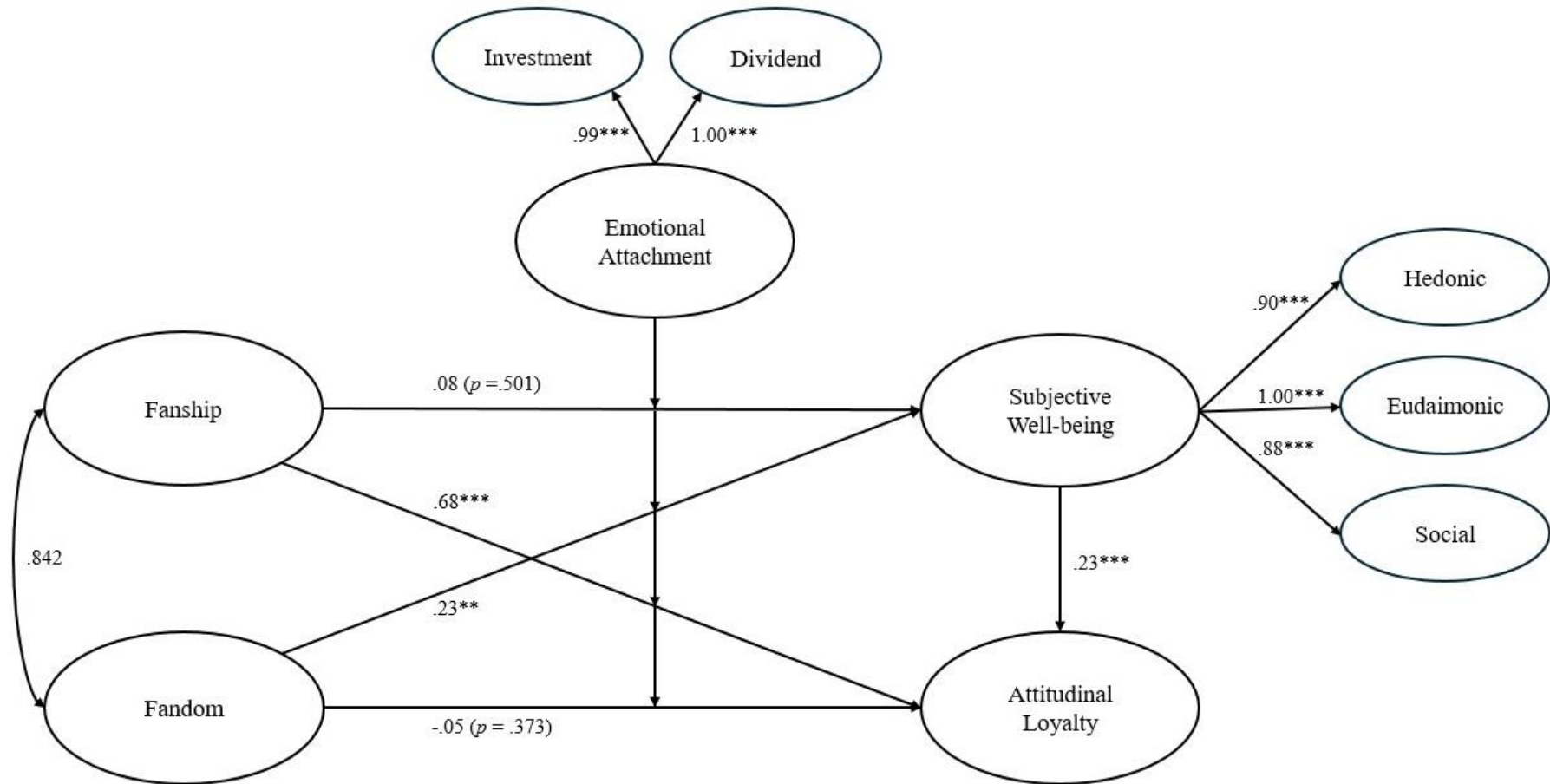
Notes.  $B$  = standardised coefficient;  $B$  = *unstandardised coefficient*; \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \* $p < .05$ . EMA: Emotional Attachment; FNP: Fanship; ATL: Attitudinal Loyalty to the Team; SWB: Subjective Wellbeing; FDM: Fandom

Figure 1. Hypothesised research model.



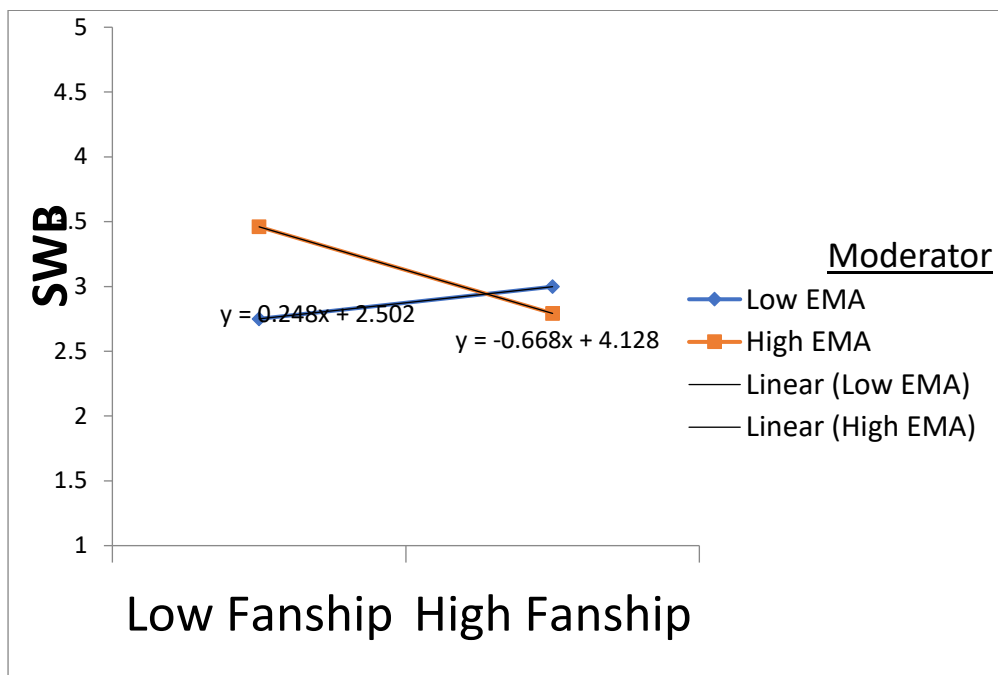
Source: authors' own elaboration.

Figure 2. Hypothesised structural model with regression weights.



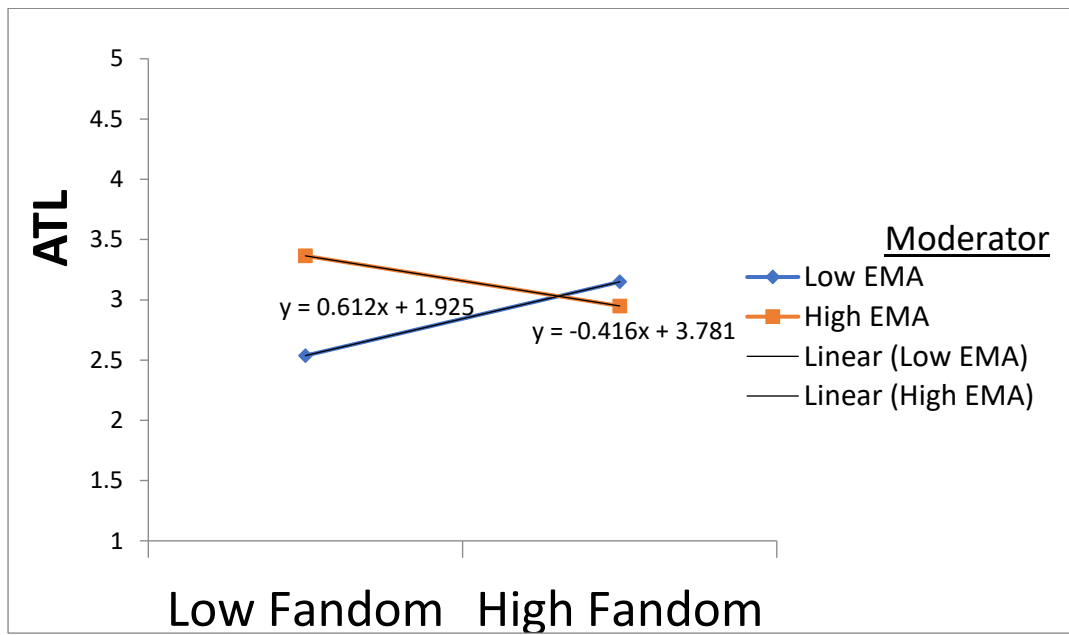
Notes. Circles represent latent variables. \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ . The model was estimated with a common method factor

**Figure 3. The moderation effect of emotional attachment in the relationship between fanship and SWB**



Notes. EMA: Emotional Attachment to the Team; SWB: Subjective Wellbeing.

**Figure 4. The moderation effect of emotional attachment in the relationship between fandom and attitudinal loyalty.**



ATL: Attitudinal Loyalty to the Team; EMA: Emotional Attachment to the Team.

**Ref: SPORTMR-D-24-00136R1**

**Manuscript Title:** *Unveiling the emotional edge: how fans' emotional attachment influences the relationships between fanship, fandom, subjective well-being, and attitudinal loyalty.*

**We would like to thank the Editor and two reviewers for their insightful and supportive comments. We have incorporated their suggestions to further refine our manuscript. The highlighted parts (in gray) in the manuscript indicate any specific changes we have made to address the Editor's and reviewers' comments.**

**On the next pages, we have included our detailed responses to each comment provided for the previous manuscript. Any further suggestions, comments, or questions are welcome.**

*Response to Reviewers*

<b><u>COMMENT</u></b>	<b><u>RESPONSE</u></b>
<b><u>Editor</u></b>	
<p>I apologise for the delay in getting this feedback to you. I have needed to go to a 3rd reviewer due to the non-response of one of the reviewers who initially engaged with this manuscript. As an editor, this is always a very disappointing outcome when there is not consistency in reviewers across versions of the manuscript. Reviewer 3 has been instructed to take into account the feedback that has been provided to the authors previously, and to take this into account in the review as you will see below. Reviewer 3 has noted some consistent messages with Reviewer #2. I suggest that the authors consider the comments from Reviewer #2 below as they work on minor revisions for this manuscript.</p>	<p>Thank you very much for your note and for the time and effort you have devoted to managing the review process for our manuscript. We fully understand the challenges that can arise when reviewers are unable to continue their engagement, and we appreciate your diligence in seeking an additional review to ensure a thorough and fair evaluation.</p> <p>We recognise that the comments provided by Reviewer 3 are in close alignment with the feedback offered by Reviewer 2. We are grateful for their constructive input, and we took care to thoughtfully address all remaining points.</p>

<b><u>Reviewer# 2</u></b>	
<p>Thank you to the authors for their comprehensive revisions and engagement with the feedback provided in the prior review. The changes made have largely addressed the concerns raised, contributing to an improved manuscript.</p> <p>Comments on the Revision:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* The additions to page 6 around identification are particularly valuable, providing a broader recognition of past work and strengthening the theoretical foundation.</li> <li>* The removal of the group comparison has resolved one of the major issues identified in the initial review.</li> <li>* The clarity around the distinction between fanship and fandom has improved, along with a more structured integration of relevant literature.</li> <li>* Engagement with a wider range of identification literature (page 6) is a positive addition that reinforces the manuscript's grounding.</li> <li>* Justifications for fandom measurement (page 18) and well-being positioning (page 19) are now clearer.</li> <li>* The discussion of limitations, particularly around attitude vs. loyalty as an outcome, is well-articulated and provides useful framing for future research.</li> </ul>	<p>We sincerely appreciate your thoughtful and constructive feedback on our revised manuscript. We are grateful for your careful reading and for acknowledging the efforts we made to address the concerns raised in the previous review.</p>
<p>Notes for consideration:</p> <p>There are areas of the manuscript (p. 7-9) that still relies too heavily on a single-author or dominant-author perspective in sections. It would be beneficial to incorporate a broader range of supporting literature or demonstrate where these concepts have been cited in subsequent research to provide a more balanced theoretical justification.</p>	<p>Thank you for this valuable feedback. In response to your suggestion, we have revised the relevant sections (pp. 7–9) to incorporate a broader range of supporting literature. In doing so, we aimed to strengthen the theoretical foundation by referencing additional scholarly works that have built upon or validated the concepts originally introduced by the initial author/work. These additions have not only diversified the theoretical perspectives presented but also better situated our approach within the wider academic discourse. We appreciate your insight, which helped us enhance the depth and balance of our theoretical justification.</p>

For example, we widened and exemplified studies concerning both fanship and fandom on pages 7 and 8:

“For example, Lock and colleagues (2012) demonstrated that identification with a team is an evolving process moving from external motivation to internalised commitment, shaped by direct experiences, player recognition, media engagement, and advocacy—each reinforcing personal and social alignment with the team”.

“Yoshida and colleagues (2015a) found a positive influence of fan community identification on team brand value and several community-related outcomes, such as active engagement, personalised product adoption, a sense of member duty, and favourable word-of-mouth promotion. Different forms of pride were also found to have positive direct and indirect (through prestige and distinctiveness dimensions) effects on team and fan community identification and related processes (Gordon et al., 2021).”

Furthermore, we provided additional support for our adopted approach by citing subsequent research. A revised passage can be found on page 9 and reads as follows:

“Furthermore, research highlighted that experiencing eudaimonic values while watching sport events may not directly influence overall well-being (Kim et al., 2017). Yet, the impact varied depending on one's level of sport fanship: individuals with higher levels of fanship experienced greater fulfillment of eudaimonic needs and stronger well-being effects (Kim et al., 2017)”.

We believe this part of the manuscript is now more balanced for the readers, as incorporating your feedback has enabled us to provide the presentation of constructive and different approaches.

<p>Within practical implications there has been some good additions, but some statements regarding practical implications remain unclear - for example, in how the findings link to implications. For instance, on page 25, the statement regarding "understanding and stimulating dynamics in fans' emotional attachment and well-being reinforcing the linkage between fans and clubs" lacks links to cited managerial applications. Perhaps considering clarifying the role of clubs and using language more tailored to practitioners would improve the accessibility of these insights.</p>	<p>We sincerely thank you for this constructive comment. We revised the practical implications section to clarify clubs' and organisations' potential roles. We also revised the language to make our discussion more accessible and clearer to practitioners and managers.</p> <p>Specifically, we revised the following three passages on pages 25 and 27 and they state:</p> <p>“Therefore, researching and collecting data on the emotional attachment and well-being of their fans—using measures adopted in this study or other scales—might enable clubs to gain an in-depth picture of identified fans who follow them. This appears highly important as our findings indicated the need for clubs and sports organisations to consider fans as key emotional stakeholders (Senaux, 2008; Zagnoli &amp; Radicchi, 2010)”.</p> <p>“In order to avoid this, organisations and clubs might support peer-led initiatives and work closely with their official fan clubs and sub-groups to foster a culture of emotional regulation”.</p> <p>“Complementarily, some fans may need relaxation over venting. Accordingly, clubs can provide calm and safe spaces at sporting venues, giving fans the opportunity to take a break from the noise and stimulation of the competition if they need to”.</p>
<p>The extensions to passion (p. 26) in the discussion feel ungrounded in prior literature. Noting the response to R1 here as to their justification, these ideas should either be more clearly justified/linked within the paper (as they are in the comments doc) or reframed as potential hypotheses for future research in later sections.</p>	<p>We appreciate this thoughtful observation. Our study was intentionally designed with a primary focus on identification and identity-related mechanisms, which is why the construct of passion was not integrated into the core model. While passion is undoubtedly a significant and well-established concept—especially within sport and fan behaviour literature—our analytical lens centered specifically on identity processes. As such, we made reference to Vallerand’s</p>

contributions on passion primarily in the discussion section to use them to interpret and contextualise our results.

We considered the conceptual boundaries of our model. Given that passion entails emotional investment, incorporating it as an independent construct could have led to theoretical redundancy or ambiguity. Still, we explicitly acknowledge this exclusion as a limitation and identify it as a promising avenue for future exploration.

This is addressed in the revised Limitations and Future Research section (pp. 28-29):

“Furthermore, while passion is an indicator of emotional attachment investment (Dwyer et al., 2015) and is closely tied with identities and identification (Vallerand et al. 2003), our study did not focus on this construct. According to Vallerand and colleagues (2003), while a person’s harmonious passion is in balance with other life domains and identities, obsessive passion is invasive and takes a large share of a person’s self, thus centralising resources. Obsessiveness takes place on a person’s uninterrupted engagement and positive performance in a passionate activity since the same activity is crucial for the individual’s perceptions of self-worth (Vallerand et al., 2003). In obsessive passion, engagement is performed even when the returns are negative as in the case of this study results (Vallerand et al., 2003). Italian football fans are well-known for their passion towards a team, and identifying with a team or a fan community borders on religious devotion for many (Billings et al., 2022; Statz et al., 2022). As football culture monopolises the overall share of sport fans’ identities, the Italian sociocultural environment might encourage obsessive passions. Future research may explore the interacting dynamics between fanship, fandom and passion”.

	We believe these additions are instrumental to striking a balance between staying true to our original research aims and recognising the broader significance of passion within the field.
On page 27, the term "random game attendees" could be refined "segments of consumers" or "segments of purchase category (season ticket holders vs attendees)" may provide a clearer distinction.	Thank you very much for this constructive specification. We agree that the proposed terminology is clearer and more appropriate to readers. Therefore, we have revised the passage on page 27 as follows: "season ticket holders versus other segments of purchase category (e.g. single-game attendees) (Zagnoli & Radicchi, 2010)"

<b><u>Reviewer# 3</u></b>	
<p>As a 3rd reviewer, I have considered carefully the reviews provided for this manuscript, as well as the considered and comprehensive approach to those reviews that have been undertaken. I have also considered the manuscript from my own "objective" perspective.</p> <p>I use this term "objective" noting that it is not helpful for a manuscript at this stage of the review process to have new and different perspectives that may change its trajectory--thus my review is as "objective" as it can be while being fair to the authors.</p>	<p>Thank you very much for your thoughtful engagement with our manuscript and for the careful consideration you have given both to the prior reviews and to the revisions we have undertaken in response. We are especially grateful for your balanced and fair approach, as well as your sensitivity to the stage of the review process.</p> <p>We sincerely appreciate your effort to assess the manuscript with objectivity while also respecting the trajectory it has taken through earlier rounds of feedback. Your constructive stance and commitment to a fair evaluation have contributed meaningfully to the development of the work, and we are thankful for your valuable perspective.</p>
<p>There is perhaps a need to broaden not the literature upon which this manuscript draws regarding the topic</p>	<p>Thank you for your thoughtful and constructive feedback. In response, we carefully revised the relevant sections (pp. 7–9) to expand the range of supporting literature and offer a more balanced theoretical perspective. Our goal was to enrich the conceptual foundation by incorporating additional studies that have either extended or validated the concepts initially proposed by the dominant author. These enhancements help contextualise our approach within a broader academic framework and provide a more nuanced justification for its use.</p> <p>Specifically, we expanded our discussion on fanship and fandom in the section titled '<i>The SIA, fanship and fandom</i>', drawing on more diverse sources. On pages 7 and 8, for instance, we now include the following:</p> <p>“For example, Lock and colleagues (2012) demonstrated that identification with a team is an evolving process moving from external motivation to internalised commitment, shaped by direct experiences, player recognition, media engagement, and advocacy—each reinforcing personal and social alignment with the team”.</p>

	<p>“Yoshida and colleagues (2015a) found a positive influence of fan community identification on team brand value and several community-related outcomes, such as active engagement, personalised product adoption, a sense of member duty, and favourable word-of-mouth promotion. Different forms of pride were also found to have positive direct and indirect (through prestige and distinctiveness dimensions) effects on team and fan community identification and related processes (Gordon et al., 2021)”.</p> <p>Additionally, to further reinforce the validity of our chosen framework, we incorporated supporting evidence from subsequent research. A revised section on pages 8-9 now reads:</p> <p>“Furthermore, research highlighted that experiencing eudaimonic values while watching sport events may not directly influence overall well-being (Kim et al., 2017). Yet, the impact varied depending on one's level of sport fanship: individuals with higher levels of fanship experienced greater fulfillment of eudaimonic needs and stronger well-being effects (Kim et al., 2017)”.</p> <p>We believe that these revisions have strengthened the theoretical depth and richness of the manuscript and improved its clarity and balance for the reader. We greatly appreciate your feedback, which significantly contributed to enhancing the quality of this section.</p>
<p>as well as thinking more strategically about practical applications and implications.</p>	<p>Thank you for your insightful comment. In response, we thoroughly revised the paragraph addressing practical implications to better clarify the potential contributions of clubs and organisations. Our aim was to ensure the language is more accessible and actionable for practitioners and managers.</p>

To this end, we updated three key segments located on pages 25 and 27. These now read:

“Therefore, researching and collecting data on the emotional attachment and well-being of their fans—using measures adopted in this study or other scales—might enable clubs to gain an in-depth picture of identified fans who follow them. This appears highly important as our findings indicated the need for clubs and sports organisations to consider fans as key emotional stakeholders (Senaux, 2008; Zagnoli & Radicchi, 2010)”.

“In order to avoid this, organisations and clubs might support peer-led initiatives and work closely with their official fan clubs and sub-groups to foster a culture of emotional regulation.”.

“Complementarily, some fans may need relaxation over venting. Accordingly, clubs can provide calm and safe spaces at sporting venues, giving fans the opportunity to take a break from the noise and stimulation of the competition if they need to.”.

We made these revisions to make the implications clearer and more applicable to real-world settings, while ensuring that they align with the study’s findings.

**Unveiling the emotional edge: How fans' emotional attachment influences the relationships between fanship, fandom, subjective well-being, and attitudinal loyalty.**

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