RESEARCH

Hail to thee, my sports team brand: investigating the drivers of eFANgelism among fans of selected sports teams in the English Premier League (EPL)

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Abstract

Sports fans participate in supporting sports teams by demonstrating various attitudinal behaviors such as loyalty, purchase intention, and stadium attendance. However, although the literature indicates that sports fans who are fanatics can demonstrate advanced attitudinal behavior such as eFANgelism, very little has been done on the drivers of this advanced attitudinal behavior. This study utilized social identity theory to create a conceptual model which looked at how fan identification and fan community identification can be used to promote eFANgelism via perceived brand sacredness among sports fans in Tanzania. The purpose of the study was to provide insights into factors that can improve positive brand promotion among sports fans in Tanzania. Partial least square-structural equation modeling was used to analyze data collected from 322 sports fans of selected sports teams in the English Premier League. The findings indicate that fan identification and fan community identification are important drivers of eFANgelism via perceived brand sacredness. The study recommends that sports team managers should view sports fans as valuable assets that can help create and maintain a competitive advantage for their teams. In addition, sports managers can consider sports fans as an engine toward building the corporate reputation of sports organizations.

Keywords Fan identification, Fan community identification, Perceived brand sacredness, eFANgelism, Sports fan

Introduction

Recent studies in the domain of sports marketing have explored the concept of evangelism within the sports industry, leading to the emergence of eFANgelism [45, 54]. eFANgelism refers to positive behavior exhibited by sports fans toward their favorite sports team brand [29, 82]. This behavior is characterized by passionate promotion of the team's values, active participation in team-related activities, and a strong sense of admiration and loyalty toward the brand [22]. Moreover,

eFANgelism involves defending the brand against detractors and engaging in positive word-of-mouth activities to enhance the brand's popularity. Researchers have shown increasing interest in studying positive fan behavior like eFANgelism in order to counterbalance aggression or negative behavior exhibited by some fans [22, 29]. Despite the expansion of the concept of evangelism within the sports industry, the existing academic literature lacks comprehensive insights into the factors that drive advanced attitudinal behavior, including eFANgelism, among sports fans [22, 23]. Current research in sports marketing primarily focuses on explaining drivers of attitudinal behavior such as loyalty and love for sports teams [55, 63]. Additionally, the literature in sports marketing tends to examine fans' behavior related to anger, aggression, and antisocial conduct, often aimed at

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protecting the interests of their favorite team and sponsors [3, 29]. The antecedents and consequences of fan aggression in the sports industry have been extensively studied in sports marketing literature [10, 37, 51]. However, it is crucial to equally emphasize the examination of advanced attitudinal behavior displayed by passionate sports fans, such as eFANgelism [62]. Although a few scholars in sports marketing have introduced the concept of eFANgelism, it has not received sufficient attention within the sports marketing domain[23].

A growing number of scholars argue that evangelism is a means by which loyal sports fans participate in building sports team superiority in the ever-growing and competitive sports industry [3, 11, 56]. Sports team superiority has become a major concern for sports marketers due to the potential opportunities that the sports industry offers to sports organizations and corporate stakeholders [1]. The global sports market has experienced a compound annual growth rate of 5.2%, rising from USD 486.61 billion in 2022 to USD 512.14 billion in 2023 [82]. This growth provides a significant opportunity for sports organizations and corporate stakeholders to reap substantial commercial benefits [3, 83]. The involvement of sports fans is one of the most crucial areas in which sports teams must invest to create superior value [67, 75]. Sports fans actively participate in building the sports team brand through various approaches, including eFANgelism [22]. Understanding sports fans' behavior, particularly that of loyal sports fans, is considered the foremost step toward the success of sports teams or sports organizations [3, 23]. In the field of sports marketing, highly identified sports fans can demonstrate support and loyalty to their favorite sports team through extraordinary behavior that goes beyond typical sports fans' actions, such as attending games and purchasing team merchandise [45, 58]. According to [44], highly attached sports fans can assume roles and responsibilities as evangelists by energetically engaging and participating in team-centered interactions, as well as passionately spreading team-related beliefs throughout the entire sports industry.

Various studies in the domain of sports marketing suggest that evangelistic behaviors make a significant contribution to sports teams and sport organizations beyond the commercial benefits derived from the sale of sports team merchandise and stadium attendance [3, 32]. Evangelistic behavior in sports marketing has a notable impact on attracting potential investments, including sponsorships from corporate sectors [60]. Sport fandom encompasses more than just attending sporting events; it involves maintaining social connections through conversations centered around a specific team and participating in related social activities [28]. The discourse and social rituals centered around the team create two key factors that influence fan behavior: identification with the team and identification with the fan community [3, 65]. In the context of sports marketing, the strategic management of social identity among sports fans offers psychographic avenues for sports managers and marketers. Gordon et al. [31] suggest that sports fans are drawn to sports for identity formation and opportunities for social identification that go beyond conventional forms of fan behavior. Scholars in the field of sports marketing are deliberating on additional forms of loyalty from fans that should be considered, in addition to traditional behaviors like purchasing team merchandise and attending stadium events, which have been the primary focus of sports managers [77, 82] argues that the concept of brand evangelism has increasingly captured the attention of scholars in the marketing domain as a supplement to traditional behaviors.

Empirical studies in sports marketing suggest that sports teams or organizations should exert more effort and pay greater attention to the factors that foster fan evangelism for their teams or organizations [22, 3], and [29] argue that advanced brand-building behavior serves as a marketing strategy that contributes to the viability and success of sports teams or organizations. However, there is a dearth of empirical research exploring the drivers of evangelistic behavior in the field of sports marketing. The majority of studies in sports marketing focus on examining the precursors and outcomes of traditional brand-building behaviors, such as loyalty, purchasing sports team merchandise, and positive referrals to sponsor brands. Mahmoudian et al. [54] reveal that fan loyalty is heavily influenced by an athlete's brand image, encompassing their marketable lifestyle, athletic performance, and appealing appearance. Reference [20] examine the motivations behind supporting players and the effects of these motivations on identification and behavioral loyalty. The findings indicate that when fans develop an interest in a sports league, it influences their identification with players and commitment, with player identification driving behavioral loyalty. Other studies, such as [22], suggest that love for a sports team impacts the intention to renew club membership, even in the face of increased costs and unsatisfactory on-field or off-field performance. The study by Stroebel et al. [80] highlights that team merchandise plays a crucial role in fostering team identification and loyalty. Thus, the existing literature indicates a limited amount of documentation on the antecedents of eFANgelism.

The purpose of the study is to create a theoretical framework that examines the impact of fan identification and fan community identification on eFANgelism.

To achieve this, the study utilized social identity theory to develop and test a research model that explores how social identification-based variables influence eFANgelism. The study proposes that a person's sense of self stems from their membership in social group(s) and the emotional significance they attach to that membership, which, in turn, influences perceived brand sacredness and eFANgelism. The study suggests that fan identification, which refers to a fan's psychological connection to a team, affects perceived brand sacredness, associated with a brand's sacred status. Additionally, the proposed research model suggests that fan community identification, which relates to the degree of fans recognizing the fan community as "me" or "not me" and how they align with the most salient identity, affects perceived brand sacredness. The study also proposes that perceived brand sacredness mediates the relationship between social identification-based variables (i.e., fan identification and fan community identification) and eFANgelism parameters (i.e., advertise, advocate, assimilate, and antagonize). Ultimately, the study aims to address the following important questions regarding the impact of social identification-based variables on eFANgelism.

RQ1 Does perceived brand sacredness mediates the relationship between fan identification and eFANgelism?

RQ2 Does perceived brand sacredness mediates the relationship between fan community identification and eFANgelism?

Theoretical framework

The theoretical foundation of this study is based on social identity theory, which suggests that individuals develop their social identity by categorizing themselves and emphasizing the perceived differences between themselves and members of the out-group, as well as the perceived similarities between themselves and other members of the in-group [7, 33, 70]. The relevance of this theory in the context of this study is that it speculates that sports fans who are fanatical about their sports team develop in-group membership with their favorite club and in-group membership with other fans of the favorite sports team [64, 73]. Furthermore, the theory is used to propose that both forms of in-group membership promote an intention to support the favorite sports team through fanatic behavior, such as eFANgelism. Social identity refers to an individual's awareness of belonging to a specific social category or group [13, 73]. According to social identity theory, a social group is formed by a group of individuals who share social identification and perceive themselves as members of the same social group [15, 66]. Social identity theory suggests that social comparison leads to the formation of in-group and out-group members [14, 73]. As part of the social comparison process, individuals who share similarities with themselves are categorized as part of the in-group, whereas those who differ from them are placed in the out-group [38]. Social identity encompasses emotional, evaluative, and other psychological connections associated with in-group categorization.

Social identity theorists propose that the formation of social identity involves two primary processes: self-categorization and social comparison, leading to a variety of outcomes or consequences. Self-categorization focuses on perceived distinctions between oneself and out-group members, as well as similarities between oneself and in-group members. Conversely, social comparison results in the selective application of the accentuation effect, particularly on dimensions that lead to self-enhancement [33, 34]. In sports marketing, social identity theory has been employed to explain the behavior of sports team fans [15, 21, 41, 77, 79]. This theory proves useful in the realm of sports marketing when attempting to elucidate the intergroup relationships between different sports teams and their supporters or fans [3, 73, 77, 79]. For this study, social identity theory was employed to clarify how personal identification and social identification work in conjunction to establish a sense of sacredness toward sports teams and eFANgelism. The study utilized this theory to propose that engaged sports fans form a collective identity that facilitates the development of self-identity (fan identification) and community formation (fan community identification). By employing social identity theory, the study suggests that fan identification and fan community identification drive extra-role behavior associated with brand-building activities.

Literature review and hypotheses development
eFANgelism

The term "eFANgelism" is an extension of the concept of brand evangelism, which is an advanced form of attitudinal behavior [22]. Guy Kawasaki, who is believed to be the father of brand evangelism, defines it as the process of making people believe in your brand [44]. Brand evangelism entails the behavior of individuals aimed at bringing about transformative change in the minds of others by encouraging them to embrace the brand [6, 7]. It is characterized by passionate promotion, unwavering enthusiasm, and a deep love and belief in the brand's value and potential to fulfill one's aspirations [4, 40, 43]. Brand evangelism refers to the positive attitude and enthusiastic behavior of loyal customers toward their favored brand. It is a form of word-of-mouth (WOM) communication that emphasizes

the relationship between the brand and its customers [6, 39, 60]. However, there are notable distinctions between brand evangelism and WOM. WOM is transactional and time-specific, focusing on sharing a person's level of product or service satisfaction at a particular moment [8, 20, 28]. In contrast, brand evangelism is characterized by a strong relational aspect that extends beyond a specific timeframe, as it is based on a lasting connection between customers and their preferred brand [74]. Moreover, while WOM focuses solely on sharing something special about the brand based on satisfaction without necessarily persuading others to purchase the brand, brand evangelism aims to convince and influence others to make a purchase [20, 43]. Brand evangelism involves behaviors such as the intention to purchase a trusted brand, the intention to recommend and persuade others to choose a trusted brand, and the intention to defend a trusted brand through oppositional loyalty toward competing brands [5].

The term eFANgelism refers to a phenomenon in which sports fans passionately and actively engage in recurring team-related practices or communication with others [23]. It encompasses fan behavior that is rooted in the relationship between sports fans and their favorite sports team brand, and is characterized by the enthusiastic dissemination of team-related beliefs and interactions [60]. eFANgelism is primarily motivated by a strong emotional bond between sports teams and their supporters. The concept of eFANgelism, as conceptualized by [22], consists of four major components: advertising, advocating, assimilating, and antagonizing. Advertising within eFANgelism refers to the inclination of sports fans to promote their favorite sports team merchandise by displaying it publicly. This can be observed through behaviors like showcasing team affiliation on cars, at work, online, or through gifting to others. Furthermore, eFANgelism includes the fans' tendency to outwardly communicate and advocate for their favorite sports team's superiority. Advocacy reflects the internalization and active promotion of the team's excellence over others. Assimilation is another aspect of eFANgelism, describing how sports fans identify themselves with their favorite team and the fan or team community. In the realm of sport marketing, outgoing group assimilation is demonstrated through game-day behaviors, such as participating in special gatherings, engaging in communication, and making apparel choices that signify support for the team. Conversely, eFANgelism also encompasses antagonistic behavior, wherein sports fans display provocative actions toward family and friends who do not support their favorite team. Antagonism is exemplified by holding negative and opposing views, and even exhibiting hostile behavior toward rival teams and their sponsors.

Fan identification

Fan identification refers to the psychological attachment that fans develop with their favorite sports team, stemming from the personal significance and meaning they attribute to the team [47, 87]. It represents the psychological bond between fans and their preferred teams, which can have a significant impact on various fan behaviors, both positive and negative [21, 50]. According to social identity theorists, when individuals develop identification with a focal object, such as a sports team, it is likely that they will also develop identification with other members who share that identification with the object [15, 73, 77]. In the domain of brand communities, research indicates that individuals place the brand at the core of the community, facilitating a sense of belonging, fostering connections, and inspiring the sharing of identity and values among brand fans [15, 77]. Additionally, studies suggest that fan identification can lead to positive feelings of belonging within a fan community, subsequently enhancing a fan's self-esteem [3, 30]. Fan identification may motivate individuals to seek shared identity and values with other fans of their favorite sports team. Evidence indicates that this shared identity and value expression can be observed through the purchase and wearing of team merchandise, such as jerseys, as a means to boost their self-esteem, particularly after a victory [65, 68, 74]. Conversely, some fans may abstain from purchasing or wearing team merchandise and disassociate themselves from other fans following repeated losses or adverse outcomes [90].

Furthermore, research in the realm of sports marketing indicates that highly identified fans develop a sense of sports team sacredness, which is an individual psychological state characterized by sports team rituals, a sense of joy, unity, social fabric, and a common bond [62, 69]. Sports team sacredness represents the ability of sports teams to create a shared cultural experience that transcends the game itself, fostering a collective spirit and a sense of belonging that can persist for generations [24, 36, 69]. Several academic studies in sports marketing highlight fan identification as a crucial determinant of fan behavior, including loyalty, team devotion, and aggressive behavior [3, 19]. Fan identification can also influence attendance at games, viewership of games on television, and engagement in discussions with other fans [17, 68]. Highly identified fans may perceive their personal beliefs and values reflected in their favorite team, leading to a strong sense of belonging and emotional investment. Fan identification has the potential to enhance a fan's self-esteem and is influenced by various factors, such as their self-concept, their connection with the team, and the emotional and subjective value they associate with this affiliation [3, 74]. Fans with strong identification with a

sports team may utilize this association to bolster their self-esteem by aligning themselves with the team's characteristics or qualities, whether positive or negative, such as accomplishments or setbacks [84]. They may experience a "basking in reflected glory" effect, deriving satisfaction from their team's victories, or engage in "cutting off reflected failure" by distancing themselves from the team's losses. Therefore, this study hypothesized that.

H_1 Fan identification positively associated with perceived brand sacredness.

Fan community identification

The literature suggests that fan community identification occurs when a sports team fan develops a sense of connection with other members of the team's community and perceives a distinction between themselves and non-members [26, 42]. This sense of membership is fostered through collective unity, inclusiveness, and shared knowledge among community members [49, 57]. Fan community identification has significant implications for various aspects of sports marketing, such as enhancing sports team brand equity, promoting member responsibility, and generating positive word-of-mouth [3, 48, 81]. Additionally, research in sports marketing indicates that fan community identification facilitates fan community engagement by creating an environment that encourages active participation [36, 48, 49]. Fan community identification establishes a sense of collective unity based on the shared connections and goals of sports fans [45, 54, 86]. This unity motivates fans to share in the team's successes and praises [30, 74]. Moreover, fan community identification promotes feelings of positivity, inclusivity, and bonding, enabling members to access social opportunities and form meaningful connections with one another [3, 48]. Inclusivity implies that sports fan members develop a strong sense of bonding, allowing them to attend live games, participate in social media conversations, engage in team-sponsored events, and more [9, 12]. Fan community identification provides avenues for sports fans to engage with each other and build meaningful connections [11, 54]. The literature in sports marketing suggests that fan community identification can enhance the sense of belonging by increasing sports fans' understanding and knowledge of their favorite team [50, 52]. According to social identity theory, the behaviors exhibited by sports fans stem from their intense emotional attachment to the fan community, which is considered an integral part of their self-concept [18, 30, 74]. Building upon this framework, previous studies on fan community identification indicate that a strong identification with a group

compels individuals to protect the reputation of the passionate group. Therefore, this study hypothesized that.

H_2 Fan community identification positively associated with perceived brand sacredness.

Mediation role of perceived brand sacredness

In the context of sports teams, perceived brand sacredness refers to the extent to which fans regard their team's brand as sacred and untouchable, similar to a religious artifact [52, 59, 80]. This concept originates from the field of brand management, where it is recognized as a crucial factor contributing to a brand's overall strength and resilience [38, 76]. Perceived brand sacredness is believed to be influenced by various factors, such as the brand's history, reputation, associations with cultural or social ideals, as well as consumers' personal experiences with the brand and its products [38, 80]. Fans who perceive their team's brand as sacred often develop a deep emotional attachment to it, considering it a representation of their values, beliefs, and identity [52, 61]. Studies in sport marketing have demonstrated that highly devoted or loyal fans treat their sports team as sacred entities embodying their own characteristics and attributes [66, 71]. This inclination to view sports teams as sacred objects can sometimes lead to fan aggression, and in extreme cases, violence, when fans perceive disrespect toward their beloved team. Moreover, recent practices in professional football have exhibited a mystical devotion closely resembling religious practices [67, 75]. These religious-like practices revolve around the ideas of belonging, connection, and relation, forming the foundation for fervent supporters of sports teams [27, 53].

Research in the realm of sports marketing suggests that perceived brand sacredness has been found to drive various positive behaviors such as patronage, loyalty, and positive recommendations [11, 88]. This study proposes that fanatic sports fans, who perceive brand sacredness, are motivated to engage in advertising behavior by publicly displaying their favorite sports team merchandise [3, 45]. Additionally, perceived sacredness indicates that individuals consider a sacred object as superior to other objects [38, 76]. Therefore, this study theorizes that perceived brand sacredness motivates sports fans to engage in advocacy behavior, specifically promoting the superiority of their favorite sports team. Moreover, consumers have demonstrated perceived brand sacredness through the development of love, identification, defense, attachment, and other related factors [38, 58]. In other words, individuals establish a strong connection with a sacred object to fulfill rituals, which involves sharing cultural identity and values. Thus, the study posits that perceived brand sacredness motivates sports fans to develop a sense

of identification with their favorite team and the fan or team community [2, 3]. Furthermore, sacredness induces behaviors that foster a collective spirit and a sense of belonging toward a sacred object, which can endure for generations. Research in the domain of brand sacralization suggests that perceived brand sacredness could influence brand defense [38, 58]. Consequently, this study theorizes that perceived brand sacredness could influence feelings of protectiveness toward a favorite sports team, leading to antagonistic behaviors such as holding opposing views and displaying hostility toward rival teams.

This study posits that the perception of brand sacredness is rooted in the strong emotional connection between fans and their favored sports team. This connection emerges from the development of a shared cultural identity among sports team fans, characterized by distinct norms and values [45, 58, 59]. This shared cultural identity, which encompasses rules and values, plays a crucial role in fan identification and fan community identification [3, 24, 30, 46, 69]. When sports fans perceive a sports team's brand as sacred, they demonstrate a higher level of loyalty and a willingness to pay a premium for team merchandise. Additionally, they actively contribute to the establishment of the team's corporate reputation. Moreover, they may experience feelings of pride and a sense of protectiveness toward the brand, particularly when faced with perceived challenges or threats [89]. The perception of brand sacredness fosters a sense of attachment and devotion among sports fans that surpasses mere awareness. This, in turn, contributes to the overall strength and resilience of the sports team brand over time [32]. The concept of perceived brand sacredness involves capitalizing on cultural or social ideals, fostering a sense of community among sports fans, and emphasizing the values and beliefs that the sports team brand represents [59, 80]. Based on the aforementioned discussion, we propose the following hypothesis:

H_3 Perceived brand sacredness positively associated with advertise.

H_4 Perceived brand sacredness positively associated with advocate.

H_5 Perceived brand sacredness positively associated with assimilate.

H_6 Perceived brand sacredness positively associated with antagonize.

H_{7a} Perceived brand sacredness mediates the relationship between fan identification and advertise.

H_{7b} Perceived brand sacredness mediates the relationship between fan identification and advocate.

H_{7c} Perceived brand sacredness mediates the relationship between fan identification and assimilate.

H_{7d} Perceived brand sacredness mediates the relationship between fan identification and antagonize.

H_{8a} Perceived brand sacredness mediates the relationship between fan community identification and advertise.

H_{8b} Perceived brand sacredness mediates the relationship between fan community identification and advocate.

H_{8c} Perceived brand sacredness mediates the relationship between fan community identification and assimilate.

H_{8d} Perceived brand sacredness mediates the relationship between fan community identification and antagonize.

Methodology
Research design and data collection
This study examined sports fans of selected sports teams from the English Premier League (EPL) in Tanzania. The selection of respondents was based on prior studies in sports marketing and sociocultural considerations specific to Tanzania. Figure 1 presents a diagram illustrating the hypotheses tested in this study, which aimed to explore the causal relationships between the variables of interest. To achieve this objective, a cross-sectional survey research design was employed, utilizing quantitative methods to empirically test a research model [85, 91]. The study encompassed a large population of sports fans supporting various teams in the English Premier League (EPL). Despite the presence of local premier leagues in many sub-Saharan African countries, the EPL remains the most popular league among sports fans in the region. Approximately 276 million people in sub-Saharan Africa are estimated to watch the Premier League each season, indicating a rapidly growing audience with significant economic benefits. Therefore, this study aimed to uncover the reasons behind this trend, providing valuable insights for sports organization managers in local premier leagues across sub-Saharan countries. The respondents represented a diverse range of demographic characteristics and geographical locations, making the
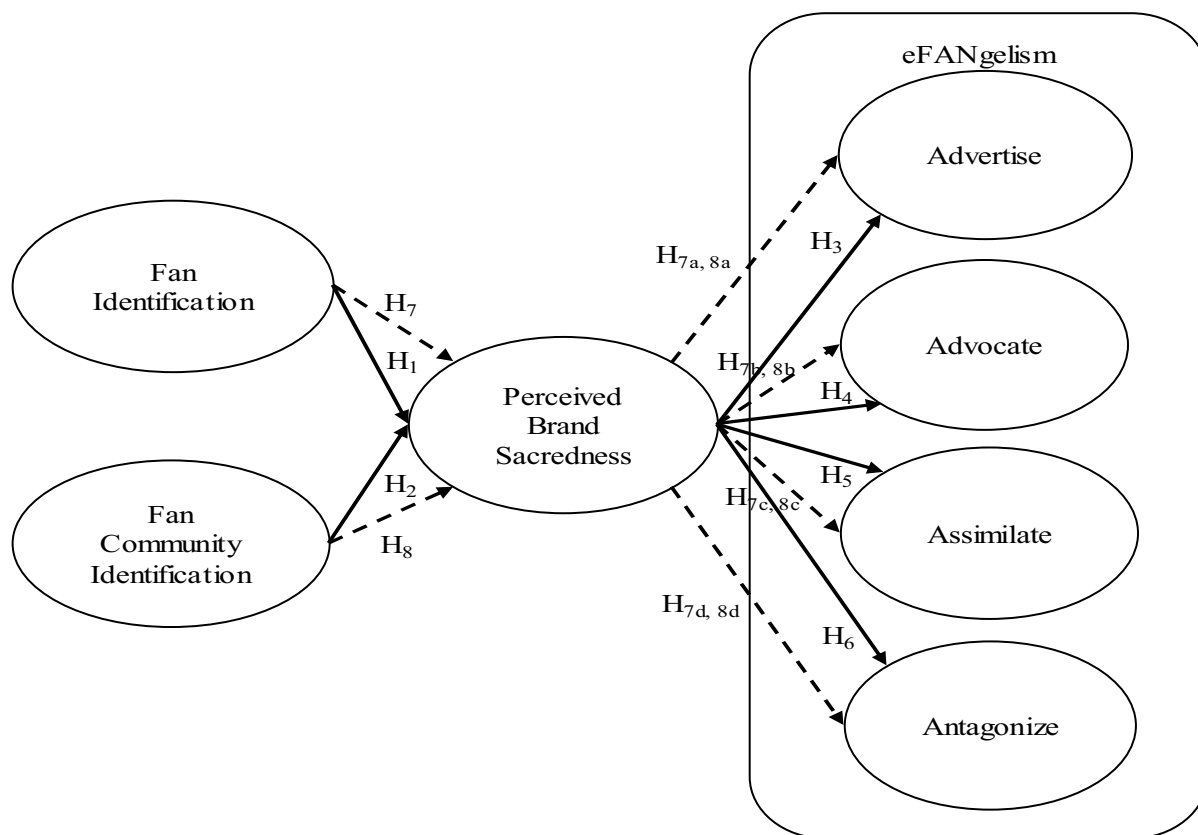
Fig. 1 Research framework

survey approach suitable for this study. Data collection occurred at a single point in time and place, justifying the use of a cross-sectional design.

Sampling and data collection procedures
The study employed a non-probability convenience sampling technique to select the sample. This approach was appropriate because the study population lacked documentation, and therefore, sample size determination was based on accessibility and availability. The researchers approached potential participants on their campuses and obtained their consent to participate in the study. Each respondent had to verbally confirm their status as a football fan and follower of sports teams in the English Premier League (EPL). To ensure that only respondents meeting the inclusion criteria were given the questionnaire, a screening question was included in the survey instrument. Before conducting the full-scale survey, the study conducted a pretest of the instrument to assess its clarity and effectiveness. It is recommended by [63] that a default sample size of 30 participants be used for identifying common problems in the instrument. Therefore, the study utilized a total of 41 respondents for the pretesting phase, which is above the criterion of 30 participants

recommended by [63]. Following the pretest, the instrument underwent minor improvements, such as rephrasing measurement statements and enhancing clarity. The study ultimately included a total of 322 respondents, which was considered sufficient for conducting multivariate data analysis. According to [33], a sample size of 150 or above is recommended to ensure model stability and robustness of findings when using PLS-SEM. It is worth noting that PLS-SEM is not influenced by sample size, and therefore, a sample size exceeding 150 is considered large enough to generate findings that can be generalized to the entire study population. The data collection for this study was conducted in September 2022.

Measurement scales
To gather data that aligns with the study's objective, we utilized well-established and validated scales from previous studies in sports marketing. We made slight modifications and improvements to the concepts and renamed key terms to ensure the scales were suitable for the study's focus. The survey instruments consisted of two main sections. The first section included measurement items, which can be found in Table 1. The second section of the survey focused on the sociodemographic characteristics

Table 1 Results of item statistics and measurement model

Construct	Codes	Measurement items	Factor loadings	Cronbach alpha	Composite reliability	Average variance extracted
Fan Identification				0.748	0.753	0.666
	fid1	I consider my favorite team success as my success	0.846			
	fid2	When someone praises my favorite team it feels like a personal compliment	0.844			
	fid3	Being a fan of my favorite team is very important to me	0.754			
Fan Community Identification				0.868	0.868	0.716
	fci1	I like to interact with other members of my favorite team community	0.816			
	fci2	I enjoy exchanging ideas with other fans of my favorite team	0.853			
	fci3	I really identify with people who are the funs of my favorite team	0.871			
	fci4	I feel a deep connection with others who are the funs of my favorite team	0.844			
Perceived Brand Sacredness				0.884	0.884	0.684
	Pbs1	I find my favorite team brand deserving veneration or respect unlike any other teams	0.796			
	Pbs2	I am willing to sacrifice my self-interest for the favorite team brand	0.815			
	Pbs3	Participating in group events related to my favorite team brand gives me a unique identity	0.864			
	Pbs4	I feel a strong sense of affinity toward fellow believers of the favorite team brand	0.866			
	Pbs5	This favorite team brand holds me spellbound or fascinated	0.790			
Advertise				0.881	0.889	0.739
	ade1	I display my favorite merchandize on my properties, e.g., car, computers, mobile phones	0.866			
	ade2	I display my favorite team merchandize on my desk at work or school	0.908			
	ade3	I give my favorite team-related gift for birthdays and holidays	0.875			
	ade4	I include my favorite team-related information in my social media accounts	0.784			
Advocate				0.846	0.850	0.685
	adt1	I try to convince others that my favorite team is superior to all others	0.812			
	adt2	I refer to my favorite team as "WE" or "US"	0.882			
	adt3	I tell others about the great players on my favorite team	0.795			
	adt4	I engage in conversations with strangers about my favorite team	0.818			
Assimilate				0.831	0.832	0.747
	ase1	I get together with a special group of friend/family to watch my favorite team play or games	0.845			
	ase2	I wear my favorite team merchandize on game day	0.882			

Table 1 (continued)

Construct	Codes	Measurement items	Factor loadings	Cronbach alpha	Composite reliability	Average variance extracted
	ase3	I initiate communication with friends/family that are fans of my favorite team during games	0.866			
Antagonize				0.811	0.821	0.725
	ane1	I initiate communication with friends/family that are not fans of my favorite team after they lose	0.866			
	ane2	I initiate communication with friends/family that are not fan of my favorite team after they win	0.817			
	ane3	I fell happy when friends/family that not fans of my favorite team are unhappy after they lose	0.870			

of the participants, such as gender, age, marital status, and the specific English Premier League sports team they support. All scales were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Fan identification was assessed using four items adapted from [3, 30]. To measure fan community identification, the study adopted four items from [31]. Perceived sacredness was measured using four items adopted from [86]. The term "eFANgelism" was approached as a multidimensional construct, comprising advocates (four items), assimilate (four items), antagonize (four items), and advertise (four items), which were adopted from [23].

Results

Measurement model analysis

The measurement model underwent an analysis to test the reliability and validity of the data. Construct reliability was assessed using composite reliability coefficients and Cronbach's alpha coefficients. As shown in Table 1, all constructs achieved values above the minimum threshold of 0.7 for Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability. To establish convergent validity, factor loadings and average variance extracted (AVE) were examined. As displayed in Table 1 and Fig. 2, all items scored above 0.6, and the AVE values for all variables exceeded 0.5, indicating successful convergent validity. Discriminant validity was also tested to ensure that measures that should not be related across latent constructs indeed showed no significant relationships. The heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) method was employed, with a recommended cutoff point of less than 0.85 [1]. Table 2 demonstrates that none of the values exceeded 0.85, confirming that the criteria for discriminant validity were met. Considering the cross-sectional nature of the study, common method bias was assessed. Common method bias refers to shared statistical variance introduced by the survey instrument itself rather than the specific items representing constructs [29]. Despite implementing procedural remedies during survey instrument development and data collection, statistical remedies were also employed. The Harman single-factor test was used to examine whether common method bias was a concern [25, 54]. The results of the Harman single-factor test indicated that no single variable explained more than 50% of the variance, suggesting that common method bias was not an issue in the data.

Table 2 Testing of discriminant validity using heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ratio

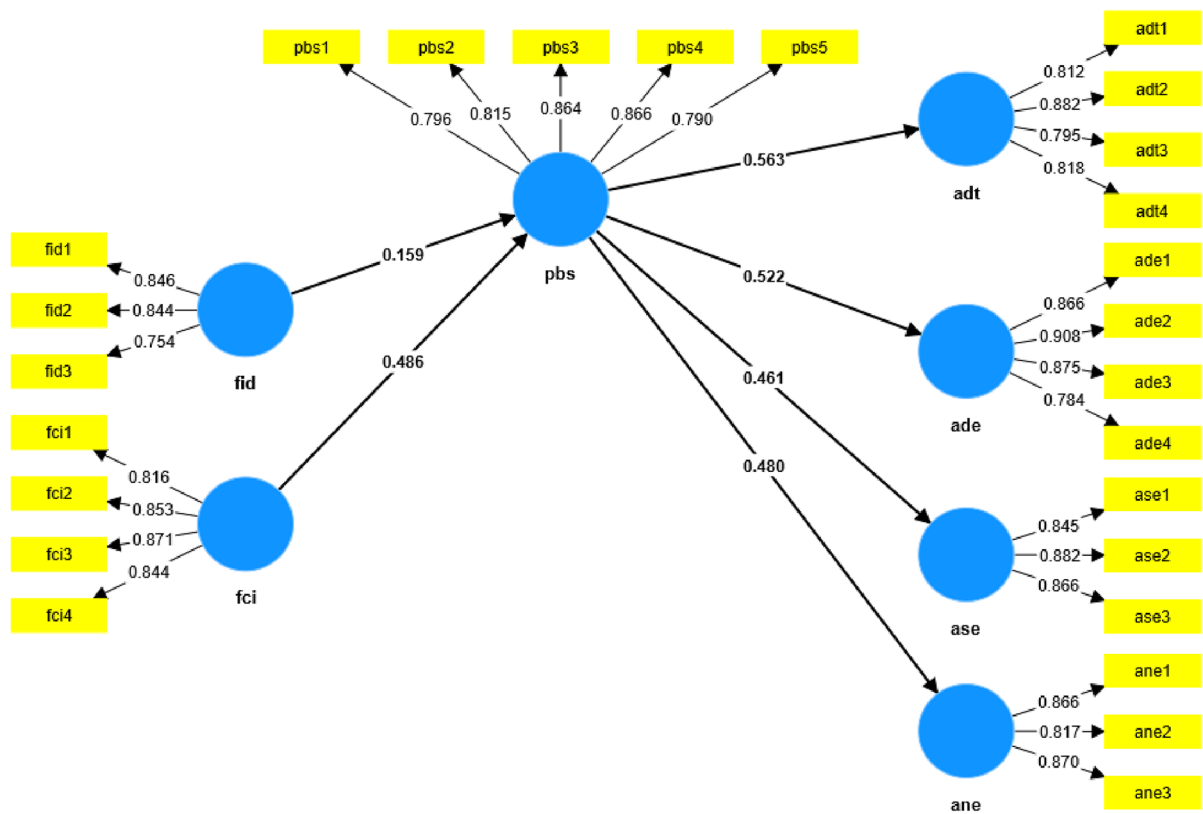|	ADE	ADT	ANE	ASE	FCI	FID
ADT	0.520					
ANE	0.692	0.534				
ASE	0.724	0.585	0.703			
FCI	0.674	0.711	0.585	0.731		
FID	0.644	0.374	0.492	0.584	0.597	
PBS	0.585	0.649	0.562	0.538	0.638	0.479

Fig. 2 Measurement model

Structural model analysis and testing of hypothesized relationships

The proposed model was tested using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). The study tested the predictive accuracy of the model by using the explained variance portion (R^2). The explained variance portion (R^2) revealed that Fan Identification and Community Identification accounted for 33.5% of the variance in perceived brand sacredness. Additionally, the coefficient of determination, R^2, indicated that perceived brand sacredness explained 27.3%, 31.7%, 21.3%, and 23.1% of the variance in advertise, advocate, assimilate, and antagonize, respectively. On top of that, the study utilized Q^2 to test the predictive relevance of the model, following the guidelines by [19] who suggest that when Q^2 is greater than zero, it indicates good predictive relevance of the model. The findings indicate that the average cross-validated redundancy is 0.081, which exceeds zero. Therefore, the model demonstrated an acceptable fit and acceptable predictive relevance. The model fit indices demonstrated that the standardized root-mean square residual (SRMR) was 0.054, which is below the threshold of 0.08 suggested by [39]. The squared Euclidean distance

(d_ULS) was 0.252, below the threshold of 0.95, as recommended by [33]. Similarly, the geodesic distance (d_G) was 0.111, below the threshold of 0.95, according to [33]. The normed fit index (NFI) was 0.9, falling within the recommended range of ≥ 0.9 established by [16]

H$_1$ proposed a significant positive relationship between fan identification and perceived brand sacredness. The empirical findings, as shown in Table 3 and Fig. 3, supported this proposition ($\beta = 0.158$, $t > 1.96$, $p < 0.05$). H$_2$ proposed that fan community identification has a significant positive influence on perceived brand sacredness. This hypothesis was also supported by the findings ($\beta = 0.486$, $t > 1.96$, $p < 0.001$). Additionally, the study in H$_3$ proposed a positive significant relationship between perceived brand sacredness and advertising. The empirical findings, as shown in Table 3 and Fig. 3, supported this proposition ($\beta = 0.522$, $t > 1.96$, $p < 0.001$). H$_4$ of this study proposed that perceived brand sacredness influences advocacy. This proposition was supported by the following statistical findings ($\beta = 0.563$, $t > 1.96$, $p < 0.001$). The findings presented in Table 3 and Fig. 3 supported H$_5$, which proposed that perceived brand sacredness has a significant positive influence on assimilation, with ($\beta = 0.461$,

Table 3 Structural parameter estimates

| Hypothesized path	Estimates	*t* statistics	*p* value	Decisions (YES/NO)
H_1: Fan Identification → Perceived Brand Sacredness	0.158	2.879	0.004	Yes
H_2: Fan Community Identification → Perceived Brand Sacredness	0.486	8.795	***	Yes
H_3: Perceived Brand Sacredness → Advertise	0.522	9.871	***	Yes
H_4: Perceived Brand Sacredness → Advocate	0.563	10.666	***	Yes
H_5: Perceived Brand Sacredness → Assimilate	0.461	7.943	***	Yes
H_6: Perceived Brand Sacredness → Antagonize	0.480	9.038	***	Yes
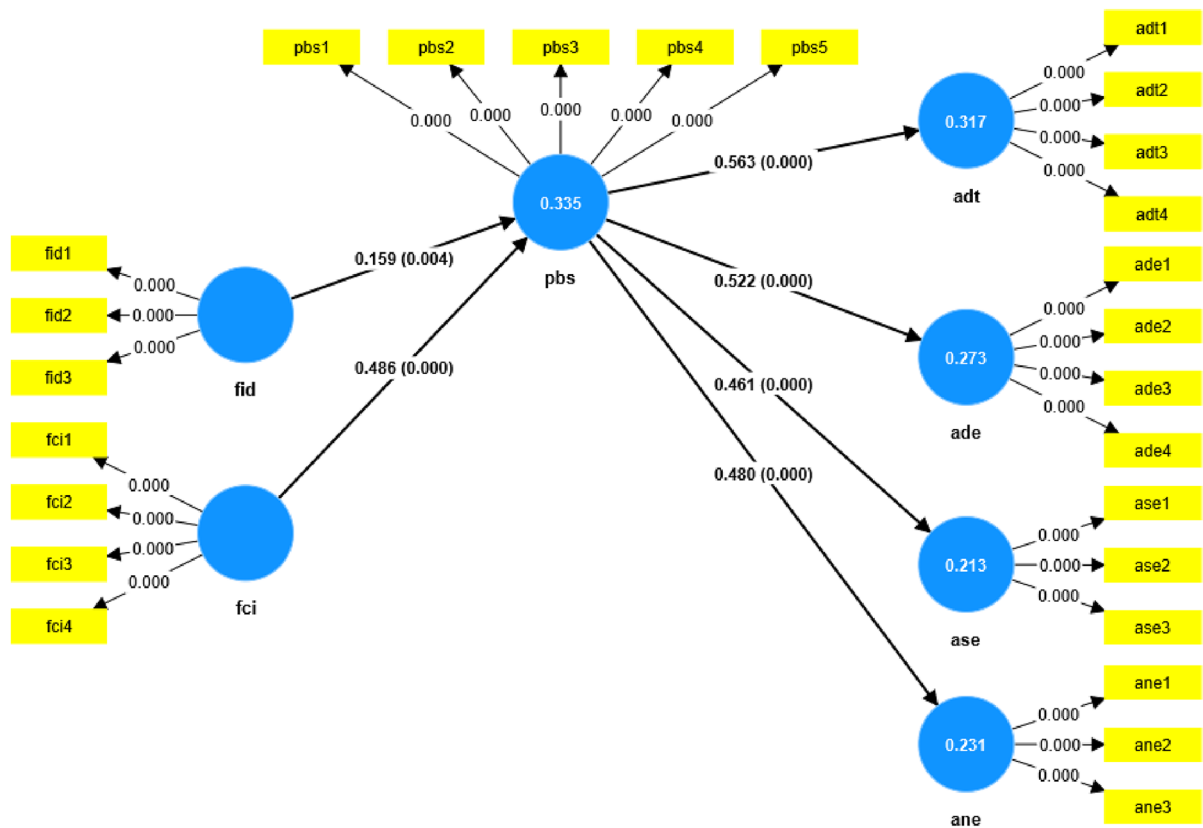
Fig. 3 Path model

$t > 1.96$, $p < 0.001$). Lastly, H_6 of this study proposed that perceived brand sacredness affects antagonism. This hypothesis was supported by statistical findings ($\beta = 0.480$, $t > 1.96$, $p < 0.001$).

Mediation analysis

The research model depicted in Fig. 1 aimed to examine the mediating role of perceived brand sacredness in the relationships between fan identification, fan community, and eFANgelism (i.e., advertise, advocate, assimilate, antagonize) as stated in H_{7a}, H_{7b}, H_{7c}, H_{7d}, H_{8a}, H_{8b}, H_{8c}, and H_{8d}. To estimate the indirect effects and assess their significance, bootstrapping procedures were employed, utilizing confidence intervals. The study used the PROCESS Macro model 4 to generate 5000 bootstrap samples and selected the bias-corrected bootstrap method with a 95% confidence interval [35]. The results were interpreted using approaches suggested by [34]. If a zero is not included in the 95% confidence interval of the estimate, it means that the indirect effect is statistically significant. The results presented in Table 4 suggest that perceived brand sacredness mediates the relationship between

Table 4 Parameter estimates for the mediation models

Hypothesized path		Standardized estimates	BootSE	95% confidence interval (CI)		Decision (YES/NO)
				BootLLCI	BootULCI	
H_{7a}	Fan Identification → Perceived Brand Sacredness → Advertise	0.257	0.053	0.158	0.365	Yes
H_{7b}	Fan Identification → Perceived Brand Sacredness → Advocate	0.154	0.036	0.088	0.232	Yes
H_{7c}	Fan Identification → Perceived Brand Sacredness → Assimilate	0.144	0.036	0.078	0.221	Yes
H_{7d}	Fan Identification → Perceived Brand Sacredness → Antagonize	0.182	0.039	0.109	0.263	Yes
H_{8a}	Fan Community Identification → Perceived Brand Sacredness → Advertise	0.208	0.049	0.119	0.313	Yes
H_{8b}	Fan Community Identification → Perceived Brand Sacredness → Advocate	0.149	0.039	0.079	0.229	Yes
H_{8c}	Fan Community Identification → Perceived Brand Sacredness → Assimilate	0.094	0.036	0.029	0.168	Yes
H_{8d}	Fan Community Identification → Perceived Brand Sacredness → Antagonize	0.183	0.040	0.109	0.266	Yes

fan identification, fan community identification, and dimensions of eFANgelism.

Discussion

The main objective of this study was to investigate the relationship between personal and social community identification in fostering positive brand-building behavior. The study employed a research model that examined the interaction between fan identification, fan community identification, eFANgelism, and perceived brand sacredness. The study contributes to the sports marketing domain by providing valuable insights to managers and stakeholders on the drivers that can promote eFANgelism among sports team fans. The findings of this study emphasize the crucial role of fans in building the corporate reputation of sports teams and sponsors' brands. Drawing on social identity theory, the study demonstrated that fan identification and fan community identification are significant factors that stimulate positive brand-building behavior among sports team fans [17, 18, 74]. The study highlights the influence of fan identification on perceived sacredness, which refers to the feeling that a fan's favorite team brand deserves veneration and respect above other teams. Additionally, the study revealed the significant role of fan community identification in promoting perceived brand sacredness by fostering a strong sense of belonging among in-group members and developing a collective sense of difference from out-group members. These findings are consistent with previous studies [3, 17, 30], which indicate that highly identified fans are motivated to demonstrate behavior that supports their favorite sports team brand and sponsor's brand. The study also tested the mediation role of perceived brand sacredness through the research model, and the findings indicate that perceived brand sacredness mediates the relationships between fan identification, fan community identification, and eFANgelism. Therefore,

all hypotheses proposed in this study were supported, further strengthening the validity of the research model. Overall, this study provides valuable insights into the factors that drive positive brand-building behavior among sports team fans, highlighting the importance of fan identification, fan community identification, and perceived brand sacredness. These findings have practical implications for managers and stakeholders in sports marketing, informing strategies to engage fans and cultivate a strong and loyal fan base that positively impacts the corporate reputation of sports teams and sponsors' brands [3, 18, 68].

Testing for the mediation effect has revealed the significant role of perceived brand sacredness in determining various aspects of eFANgelism. Highly identified fans perceive their sports team brands as sacred, which subsequently influences them to engage in advertising by displaying sports merchandise on their cars and social media pages [69, 80]. Previous studies in the sports marketing field indicate that fan identification can foster loyalty toward both their favorite team brands and sponsor brands [18, 50, 55, 56, 68, 72, 78]. Moreover, a strong sense of sacredness motivates fans to advocate for their preferred sports brands over rival teams. Consequently, highly identified fans strive to convince others that their favorite sports team brand is superior. Amani [3] argue that this perception of superiority signifies a meaningful psychological connection between fans and the sports team brand. Additionally, when fans regard their sports team brand as sacred, it encourages them to seek assimilation [23, 27]. Assimilation refers to the inclination of highly identified fans to prefer attending and watching sports games of their favorite team in the company of friends and family members. This further strengthens the bond between the sports team brand and its fans, potentially influencing fans to actively promote team merchandise [80]. Furthermore, the findings unveil the role of

sacredness in fostering antagonistic feelings toward rival sports teams and, at times, their sponsors. These results support the idea that highly identified fans desire respect and perceive their favorite team as superior to others [10, 48, 74]. This behavior prompts sports fans to engage in derogatory discussions about rival sports teams and their associated partners, including sponsors. Moreover, sports team fans may also engage in negative discourse toward sponsors of rival sports teams to show support for sponsors of their favorite teams.

Conclusion

Theoretical implications

The purpose of this study was to investigate the factors driving eFANgelism in sports marketing by proposing and testing a conceptual model that focuses on the role of identification in fan behavior. Since eFANgelism is a relatively new concept, there is limited research on its antecedents in sports marketing. To address this gap, the study applied social identity theory to explore the impact of fan identification and fan community identification on eFANgelism through perceived brand sacredness. This study expands the current application of social identity theory by offering a theoretical viewpoint that social identification is an important driver of positive behaviors similar to eFANgelism in the context of sports marketing. The findings suggest that both fan identification and fan community identification contribute to promoting eFANgelism by building perceived brand sacredness. This study's theoretical contribution lies in its examination of fan behavior's antecedents, particularly eFANgelism, from a social identification perspective, and the mediating role of perceived brand sacredness. By emphasizing the significant role of perceived sacredness in promoting fan behavior, this study offers valuable insights for managers and other stakeholders in the sports industry. Overall, this research contributes to the limited understanding of eFANgelism in sports marketing, considering the interplay between fan identification, fan community identification, and perceived brand sacredness. This study has broadened theoretical understanding that various positive behaviors related to eFANgelism should be elaborated or explained from the perspective of social identification.

Practical implications

Several managerial insights can be drawn from this study for marketers and managers in the sports marketing domain. The findings suggest that sports fans should be viewed as strategic resources in building superior value and that various strategies should be adopted to increase and strengthen the fan base. This effort is important not only for engaging fans but also for attracting investors and sponsors who are drawn to the number of supporters of a sports team. The study, which was conducted in a sub-Saharan context, indicates that sports organizations can develop digitalized systems to engage fans from different parts of the world. By implementing fan management systems, organizations can identify the number of supporters they have and develop effective strategies to leverage their potential benefits. Such systems can be instrumental in building fan identification and fan community identification, which are key factors in motivating fan behavior, including eFANgelism. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the importance of continuing to strengthen digital platforms that allow fans to participate in various activities of the sports organization. Interactive digital platforms can help fans develop a sense of self-identity, which is a crucial driver of fan behavior. Digital platforms and application software provide an easy way to build a fan community that can share and discuss various issues related to their favorite team. These insights highlight the need for sports marketers and managers to recognize the value of engaging fans through digital platforms and fan management systems. By leveraging these tools effectively, organizations can enhance fan identification, build fan communities, and promote positive fan behavior, ultimately leading to increased support, attracting investors and sponsors, and creating a more vibrant sports marketing ecosystem.

The study recommends to managers and marketers in sports organizations that digital platforms should be active and highly engaging. This means that marketers and managers in sports organizations should actively participate in responding to various sports fans' questions and opinions. It is crucial to encourage user-generated content, which allows fans to access, comment, and post various content related to the sports team. This fosters a sense of inclusivity and belonging among members of the fan community, which is crucial in promoting identification and, ultimately, fan behavior such as eFANgelism. In addition, marketers and managers should continue to maintain a website that allows their fans to access and interact with the favorite team on a daily basis. It is necessary to have website features and content that are attractive and enable sports fans to navigate through the website easily. In a globalized world, a website is one of the most powerful communication tools, which enables sports organizations to engage with their fans and allow them to share opinions and feelings about their favorite sports team. For sports organizations managed by fan membership, it is recommended to create a management system that allows fans to register and become members of the sports team. This strategy is essential to create a fan community and can also generate income for the club, as each fan pays to become a member. Furthermore,

encouraging digital membership can enable sports fans to participate in various decisions and activities of their favorite sports team. Digital membership can also facilitate the development of a strong fan community, which is crucial in promoting loyalty and eFANgelism. By implementing these recommendations, sports marketers and managers can foster active fan engagement, strengthen fan identification, and cultivate a sense of community among sports fans. These efforts contribute to building a passionate and dedicated fan base, enhancing brand loyalty, and driving positive fan behaviors that benefit the sports organization in various ways.

Limitations and future research

This study has the potential to make a significant contribution to the field of sports marketing by expanding our understanding of how personal and social identification play a role in promoting positive brand-building behavior among fans of sports games. However, while the study has many strengths, there are limitations that provide opportunities for further research in this area. For instance, the data collected in this study were only from fans of selected sports teams in the English Premier League. Future research could incorporate a cross-cultural perspective to produce more diverse results that can bolster the study's findings. A cross-cultural perspective would allow the collection of data from different social settings, enhancing the robustness of the findings in the subject matter. Comparative studies can be conducted to explore gender differences in building identification and its influence on positive brand-building behavior. Additionally, comparing fans of different sports in terms of their levels of personal and social identification and how it affects various positive brand-related behaviors like eFANgelism can provide valuable insights. Such comparative studies can offer differences in behavior among sports fans, enabling sports organization managers to devise specific strategies tailored to specific groups of sports fans based on their demographic characteristics. Moreover, modifying the model by including other mediator or moderator variables can provide insights into how different sociocultural contexts may influence the study's findings. For example, Schadenfreude and basking in reflected glory are two examples of potential mediators that could be added to the model and empirically tested for their role in influencing advanced positive brand-building behavior. By incorporating such variables, the modified model can further extend knowledge and insights about the subject matter by examining different interplay between variables in the study. It is also recommended that future research includes moderator variables such as gender and age, as there is considerable evidence suggesting differences in sports participation

across different demographic groups. By considering these moderator variables, the study can uncover additional nuances in the relationship between personal and social identification and positive brand-building behavior among sports fans. Finally, longitudinal studies could be used to investigate the study's findings over an extended period of time and provide further insights into the proposed research model. This approach would allow the tracing of sports fan behavior over different periods, considering that fanatic fans may demonstrate different behaviors based on team victories or losses, which can be demonstrated through basking in reflected glory or cutting off reflective failure. Longitudinal studies can shed light on the dynamics of these behaviors and their impact on positive brand-building over time.

Author contributions
This research idea was developed by DA after theoretical and empirical review. DA wrote whole manuscript including empirical and theoretical part, data analysis and interpretation of findings.

Availability of data and materials
Not applicable.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate
This study was approved by the ethics committee of the University of Dodoma. The participants provided verbal consent. The committee approved this approach, and verbal consent was deemed appropriate because respondents were obtained from restaurants or hotels when they received services, and hence, it was difficult or impossible to provide written consent. In addition, anonymity was highly considered, and hence, written consent was not found to be necessary.

Consent for publication
Not applicable.

Competing interests
The authors reported no competing interests.

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