

## **Leveraging Digital Fan Engagement for Sports Brand Loyalty: A Study of Emerging Marketing Strategies in Saudi Arabia**

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### **Abstract**

Within the modern sports world influenced by technological innovation, fan engagement has become a major strategy for developing brand loyalty. While global sports organizations increasingly turn to interactive media to build emotional and behavioral commitment, it is necessary to understand the operation of such methods in the context of different cultures. This study investigates the case of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, a nation undergoing rapid transformation in its sporting world in line with Vision 2030. In the wake of growing social media usage, gamification, and online campaigns, it is necessary to research how far the use of digital engagement drives brand commitment in young Saudi citizens.

The purpose of this research is to investigate the relation between fan engagement in the digital world and brand loyalty for sports in Saudi Arabian university students. The study investigates the intermediary role of brand perception and the impacting effect of

global branding strategies like the use of foreign participants and bilingual communications.

A quantitative questionnaire was administered on a sample of 300 students at the University of Bisha. Data was collected by means of a structured questionnaire on a five-point Likert scale, capturing digital interaction habits, brand image perceptions, and attitudinal as well as behavioral loyalty. Data analysis entailed the use of descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, multiple regression, and mediation/moderation analysis, following the guidelines provided by PROCESS models.

The findings reflect high engagement with sports brands in the digital environment, specifically through social media outlets and live streaming websites. However, the inferential analyses revealed a lack of a statistically significant relation between internet engagement and brand loyalty. Furthermore, brand image did not mediate this relation and nor did international branding strategies moderate this relation. The findings show that dependency on purely internet-based fan engagement may not be the most effective way of fostering serious loyalty in the Saudi case. This research contributes theoretically by challenging widely held assumptions regarding the generalizability of internet-based models of loyalty. It suggests that cultural and contextual issues have a considerable impact on how fans engage with brands in the online world. The study offers valuable insights for sports marketers operating in the Saudi Arabian

market. It stresses the need for combining digital methods with culturally significant communication, bespoke branding, and face-to-face experiences that maximize emotional bonds. Sports organizations should see internet platforms as part of a system of fan engagement rather than in isolation.

**Key words:** Sports Marketing, International Branding Strategies, Sports Brand Loyalty, Digital Fan Engagement, Brand Image

### الملخص

في ظل عالم الرياضة الحديث المتأثر بالابتكار التكنولوجي، أصبح التفاعل الجماهيري أحد الاستراتيجيات الأساسية لتطوير الولاء للعلامات التجارية. وبينما تتجه المنظمات الرياضية العالمية بشكل متزايد إلى الوسائط التفاعلية لبناء ارتباط عاطفي وسلوكي مع الجماهير، تبرز الحاجة لفهم كيفية عمل هذه الأساليب في سياقات ثقافية مختلفة. تبحث هذه الدراسة في حالة المملكة العربية السعودية، التي تشهد تحولاً سريعاً في عالم الرياضة تماشياً مع رؤية ٢٠٣٠. وفي ظل تزايد استخدام وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي، والتلعيب (Gamification)، والحملات الرقمية، تبرز الحاجة إلى دراسة مدى مساهمة التفاعل الرقمي في تعزيز الالتزام بالعلامة التجارية لدى الشباب السعوديين.

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف العلاقة بين تفاعل الجماهير في البيئة الرقمية والولاء للعلامة التجارية في مجال الرياضة لدى طلاب الجامعات في السعودية. كما تبحث الدراسة في الدور الوسيط لصورة العلامة التجارية، وكذلك الأثر المحتمل لاستراتيجيات العلامة التجارية العالمية مثل استخدام مشاركين أجنبي والتواصل ثنائي اللغة.

تم تنفيذ استبيان كمي على عينة مكونة من ٣٠٠ طالب من جامعة ببشة. جمعت البيانات من خلال استبيان منظم باستخدام مقياس ليكرت الخماسي، حيث تم قياس

عادات التفاعل الرقمي، وتصور صورة العلامة التجارية، والولاء السلوكي والانفعالي. وشملت عملية التحليل الإحصائي استخدام الإحصاءات الوصفية، وتحليل الارتباط بيرسون، والانحدار المتعدد، وتحليلات الوساطة والتعديل باستخدام نماذج PROCESS الإحصائية.

أظهرت النتائج وجود تفاعل مرتفع مع العلامات التجارية الرياضية في البيئة الرقمية، خاصة عبر وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي ومواقع البث المباشر. ومع ذلك، كشفت التحليلات الاستنتاجية عن عدم وجود علاقة ذات دلالة إحصائية بين التفاعل عبر الإنترنت والولاء للعلامة التجارية. كما لم تلعب صورة العلامة التجارية دوراً وسيطاً في هذه العلاقة، ولم تكن استراتيجيات العلامات التجارية الدولية عاملاً معديلاً مؤثراً. وتُبرز النتائج أن الاعتماد الحصري على التفاعل الرقمي قد لا يكون الطريقة الأكثر فاعلية لتعزيز الولاء الجاد في السياق السعودي.

تساهم هذه الدراسة نظرياً في تحدي الافتراضات الشائعة حول إمكانية تعميم نماذج الولاء المعتمدة على الإنترنت. وتشير إلى أن العوامل الثقافية والسياقية تؤثر بشكل كبير على كيفية تفاعل الجماهير مع العلامات التجارية في العالم الرقمي. وتقدم الدراسة رؤى قيمة لمسوقي الرياضة العاملين في السوق السعودية، مشددة على ضرورة الجمع بين الوسائل الرقمية ووسائل الاتصال ذات الطابع الثقافي المحلي، والعلامات التجارية المصممة خصيصاً، والتجارب المباشرة التي تعزز الروابط العاطفية. وينبغي على المنظمات الرياضية أن تنظر إلى المنصات الرقمية كجزء من منظومة متكاملة لتفاعل الجماهير، لا كوسائل منفصلة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** التسويق الرياضي، استراتيجيات العلامة التجارية الدولية، الولاء للعلامة التجارية الرياضية، التفاعل الرقمي للجماهير، صورة العلامة التجارية.

## **Introduction**

With the advent of the digital revolution in recent times, radical change has taken place. The change has been seen in the way

sporting organizations engage with their spectators. Digital engagement is a major priority in the marketing agenda of contemporary sports. The engagement is fundamentally driven by recent developments, including social media, live platforms, gamification, and software tools for online fan engagement. These technologies are intrinsic channels of communication that facilitate the development of brand loyalty, fan engagement, and economic growth. In this sense, the deflected approach assumes a supreme significance to Saudi Arabia as the state-supported Vision 2030 initiative is redefining the future of sport and entertainment.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has made substantial investments in building its sports industry as part of its grand vision for economic diversification. These other steps taken under Vision 2030 involve sports league development, global collaborations, digital infrastructure, and getting young people involved in sporting activities. Central to this change is increasing reliance on digital channels of delivering teams, communicating with followers, and crafting long-term brand relationships. Another crucial element in this change. The laboriously developed digital experience is no longer optional, but imperative that moves not just along the axis of immersion but on that of personalisation, stretching way beyond those bygone match-day interactions. While the tech-savvy Gen-Z, born as digital natives, have been raised amidst technology, they are surprisingly susceptible even so. While massive advances in online communities of enthusiasts globally

have been achieved, there remains a disturbingly small body of work in Saudi Arabia that may examine further the relationship between such behavior and sports brand allegiance. The applicability of the above results to the Saudi scenario remains uncertain given its unique national identity, consumption patterns, and values. Results of research across other nations indicate that digital touch points play significant roles in reinforcing fan identity, emotional connections, and behavior loyalties. The applicability of these results to the Saudi Arabian scenario, though, remains uncertain. To be able to better understand how sport marketing in the Middle East might be influenced by digital means like fan tokens, gamification sites, and multilingual communication strategies, more research will be required. This study seeks to examine how digital engagement strategies ensure brand loyalty among Saudi Arabian university students particularly at the University of Bisha. This study tries to fill the research gap and provide more understanding to the field.

This study aims to determine how younger, tech-savvy fans engage with sports brands on the internet and how that engagement impacts their perception, trust, and loyalty for both local and foreign sports teams.

Focusing on this category brings us close to an actual understanding of how that engagement happens. This study has the potential to be both theoretical and practical in value. This article explores the application of frameworks like Social Identity

Theory and the Psychological Continuum Model within the sport context of Saudi Arabia. The study provides sport marketers with valuable insights that can enhance fan engagement and elevate brand capital in the face of rapid digital evolution.

## **1. Literature review**

### ***2.1 Theoretical Framework***

This study is grounded on two theoretical frameworks: Social Identity Theory (SIT) and the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM). Social Identity Theory provides a comprehensive description of how individuals self-identify and associate with various groups; for example, people identify their selves with sport teams. The identity has emotional connections to brands, as expressed in loyal behavior and the feeling of personal connection to the fate or defeats of the teams (Vollero et al., 2024).

The Psychological Continuity Model stipulates a model that outlines the path an individual takes in four psychological phases within their connection with a brand: awareness, attraction, attachment, and allegiance. PCM suggests that affective investment and identification are something that accumulate over time through numerous instances of meaningful interaction, particularly those facilitated by digital technologies (Huang et al., 2024). Both models support the idea that fan interaction on the online platform may play a crucial role in building brand loyalty in the evolving sports business of Saudi Arabia. Their applicability is evident as they intersect with paradigms like

national pride, religious values, and social change in relation to Vision 2030—all intersecting through the sports identity and emotional intensity of fandom (Alawi, 2024).

## ***2.2 Digital Transformation and Fan Engagement***

Through digitalization, there has been a significant increase in the number of communication channels available for the fans to engage with their favorite teams. Social media platforms such as Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube enable real-time information, interactive content, and two-way communication between the fans and brands, including those managed by clubs (Sheng, 2024). According to Ioakimidis (2010), these applications assist in establishing a sense of connection with the brand and building a sense of belonging.

The alignment of digital engagement to the strategic Vision 2030 in Saudi Arabia is observed in investments in media, sports infrastructure, and youth engagement, all aimed at enhancing fan engagement and economic diversification (Elshaer et al., 2024); (Kulikov et al., 2024). The digital engagement of Saudi Arabia is a foundational pillar of Vision 2030.

***H1: Digital fan engagement through online platforms has a significant positive effect on fan satisfaction in the Saudi sports industry.***

## ***2.3 Digital Engagement and Brand Loyalty***

The duty of online interaction in shaping follower loyalty is more significant now, mirroring a trend that is gaining rapid

momentum. Findings from research in many different sectors (Mostafavipour, 2024; Jinga, 2024) indicate that continuous digital interaction, particularly customized interaction, directly influences brand loyalty.

Saudi Arabian research conducted by Tarifi and Bakhsh (2024) and Al-Dosari et al. (2024) locates that the extent to which digital marketing is indicative of the values of a locality and that of one's own preferences significantly influences loyalty among customers. The conclusion drawn from a consideration of the findings of the studies is as stated below. The two studies were conducted simultaneously.

***H2: Personalized digital fan engagement significantly enhances brand loyalty among Saudi sports fans.***

#### ***2.4 Emerging Digital Strategies: Fan Tokens, Gamification, and Streaming***

Examples of these engagement technologies that facilitate unique interactions between fans and brands include fan tokens, gamification, and live streaming. They are alternative channels for the fans to engage with the brands. Vollero et al. 2024 Edition Fan tokens allow the fans to become involved in decision-making about the club and to experience members' events, thereby acquiring a sense of ownership of the club. According to Elwakeel et al. (2025), other strategies such as gamification points, quizzes, and contests have been most successful in engagement and retention. This is most clearly observed in areas

such as Saudi Arabian telecommunications, where utilization of gamification techniques has been effective.

Kumar and Bagchi (2020), and Byon and Phua (2021), have concluded that live streaming is an effective means to improve engagement, particularly if it is used afterwards for social media discussions. This finding echoes the results of both authors.

***H3: The adoption of interactive digital strategies (e.g., fan tokens, gamification) positively influences fan engagement and brand loyalty in Saudi sports.***

### ***2.5 The Mediating Role of Brand Image and Trust***

The culmination of digitization will force the value of e-sales services a company can provide. This cause and effect are hand in glove; as progressive digital branding gains the upper hand, the faith and loyalty of the customer towards the company is also sure to increase. Online branding can significantly enhance the level of trust and loyalty individuals build with an organization. This is achieved through enhanced service delivery and by creating a positive image of the brand among the target market, as established in a case study in Thailand (Lomsap & Sud-on, 2019). The Saudi Arabian figures are constantly revealing these cyclical trends. As an example, online activity was found to enhance customer relationship trust in the retail and hotel sectors, as well as enhance customers' propensity to make future purchases (Alam, 2023).

***H4: Brand image mediates the relationship between digital fan engagement and brand loyalty among Saudi sports consumers.***

#### *2.6 Challenges and Cultural Factors in Saudi Arabia*

The growth in web interaction is evident, but attitudinal loyalty transformation remains in its infancy. Saudi football fan resistance to watching as often as one can be attributed to factors such as convenience, stadium quality, and provision of live transmission. This has been the argument put forth by AlAbdullah (2022) and Binjwaied et al. (2015). However, intensive research into Saudi fans of football revealed that, in contrast to others, they were marked by intense affective attachment to the sport. Nie (2024) is of the opinion that incorporating international branding strategies, which involve the inclusion of foreign players and the utilization of bilingual materials in English and Spanish, significantly boosts brand power and deepens the emotional bond with consumers.

***H5: International branding strategies (e.g., player signings, multilingual content) moderate the digital fan engagement and behavioral loyalty relationship within Saudi sports.***

#### ***2.7 Fan Engagement as an Economic and Strategic Imperative***

Engaging fans generate loyalty and, concurrently, generates money. A correlation has been established through research for direct financial outcomes in professional teams (Zhang, 2024). Loyalty programs, particularly in specialized sports, enhance retention and build brand equity (Rufer, 2018); (Singh, 2024).

***H6: Digital fan engagement is positively associated with the economic performance of sports organizations in Saudi Arabia.***

### ***2.8 Implications for Research and Practice***

The research literature under analysis here ascertains that there have been dramatic changes in online fan engagement after brand loyalty establishment in the sports sector. The function played by online engagement has changed from an add-on tool for sporting brand development to an integral component of the whole sector. Fan tokens, sponsor-focused marketing efforts, and gamification have evolved into best practices from cutting-edge features in creating emotional involvement and behavioral loyalty among fans [(Vollero et al., 2024); (Elwakeel et al., 2025)]. National identity, social norms, and values shape sports consumption behavior in Saudi Arabian culture. Digital engagement tools therefore must also be culturally sensitive in order to appeal to local culture and sensibilities. They comprise various factors such as the Arabic language, observance of religious and national days off, and adoption of widely recognized names for simple identification and emotional connection with the local supporters [(Alawi, 2024); (Tarifi & Bakhsh, 2024)].

There is an increasing need to bridge offline fan activity and online brand engagement.

While there is much fan engagement in online content, this does not necessarily carry over to physical activities such as game attendance or purchasing merchandise. It is necessary for sports

marketers to explore the combination of digital loyalty rewards and off-line rewards, such as discounts, VIP attendance at games, or customized experiences within stadiums, to effectively convert digital engagement into physical loyalty behavior [AlAbdullah, 2022]; (Binjwaied et al., 2015). This would enable them to resolve the issue. The repercussions of digital engagement appear to be expanding in political as well as economic realities.

Several organizations posit that fans that are more involved emotionally with the sporting organizations they follow are more likely to make a financial contribution to the fortunes of such organizations. Investment in digital infrastructure, thus, in the form of content creation and fan relationship management systems, is not just a requirement as a potential add-on but as a foundational essential for generating revenues and maintaining brand equity [(Zhang, 2024); Singh, 2024)].

### ***2.9 Identified Research Gap***

The Saudi research landscape is still largely unexplored, although extensive international examination of digital fan engagement and brand allegiance has been comprehensive. In turn, certain gaps were uncovered in this analysis: There is scant empirical research examining how Saudi fans react to digital marketing initiatives, while Saudi Arabia does provide a unique social, religious, and economic context.

Emerging Technologies: The study of Fan Token, Gamification, and Metaverse, particularly the application to engagement, is a rather

under-researched topic of the Middle East. Rather than studying blockchain-based applications or streaming to engage, the majority of existing studies have been on traditional digital marketing methods like social media and electronic mail marketing.

Very recent research has yet to explore barriers and facilitators during the progression of emotional to behavior loyalty, i.e., repeated buying or attendance at events. Even though various research have established Saudi Arabian fans having great emotional involvement in their favorite clubs, there are not those widely researched aspects.

**Moderator and Mediator Functions:** Within local sports loyalty frameworks, factors like brand identity, trust, and international branding are recognized but not commonly examined for their role as mediators or moderators. An urgent call is being made for more intricate models of analysis to be able to explain why the impact of digital engagement on loyalty would vary within different environments [Mostafavipour, 2024); (Lomsap & Sud-on in 2019)].

The research seeks to offer an exhaustive analysis of how new online marketing techniques affect fan loyalty, with special emphasis on the vibrant and fast-paced sports economy in Saudi Arabia.

## **2. Methodology**

### ***3.1 Research Framework***

This research employs a quantitative approach, undertaking a cross-sectional survey to investigate the correlation between online fan engagement and sports brand loyalty among Saudi

Arabian university students. The design effectively facilitates the identification of patterns, hypothesis testing, and assessing the strength of associations among key constructs like engagement strategies, brand image, and loyalty.

### ***3.2 Population and Sample***

The focus of this study is Saudi youth actively participating in sports content, specifically those identified with online media. The sample will be focused on postgraduate and undergraduate students who are currently enrolled at the University of Bisha, situated in the southern part of Saudi Arabia. University students are seen as the best subjects because they are known to be familiar with digital technology, use social media on a day-to-day basis, and are taking part more in the nation's evolving sporting culture.

The convenience sampling method will be used, keeping in mind the limitations of accessibility and time. A minimum of 300 respondents will be sought from the study, providing adequate statistical power for correlation and regression analysis.

### ***3.3 Data Collection Method***

Data collection will be via an identical, self-administered questionnaire that will be distributed electronically using Google Forms and university networks, including student email and social media groups. The survey will be presented in both Arabic and English in order to allow all responders to read and understand it with ease.

The survey will consist of five discrete sections:

1. Characteristics of the population – age, gender, field of study, and sports fan affiliation
2. Virtual Fan Engagement – frequency and type of activity with the sport brand through digital media (e.g., social networking sites, live streaming, fan tokens, gamification)
3. Brand Image and Trust – attitudes about the sport brand/team and are they trustworthy
4. Attitudinal and Behavioral Loyalty – intent to remain loyal, purchasing products, attending events
5. Moderating and Mediating Factors – such as cultural identification and enactment of international branding

All the items will be measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), adapted from tested instruments in earlier studies such as Mostafavipour (2024), Yun et al. (2020), and Vollerero et al. (2024).

### ***3.4 Validity and Reliability of Instruments***

The survey will be checked by scholarly experts in the fields of sports marketing and online communication to affirm its content validity. A pilot study involving 30 students will be administered to determine unclear items and ensure the survey is straightforward. Reliability will be checked for the measurement scales using Cronbach's alpha, and above 0.70 will be deemed acceptable.

### ***3.5 Data Analysis Techniques***

The data collected analyzed with SPSS or equivalent statistical software. The analysis will be done in the order below:

- Utilization of descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequency) to perform demographic profiling
- Utilization of Pearson correlation to examine the relationships between the most important variables
- Utilization of multiple regression analysis to examine the direct effect of digital engagement on loyalty
- Utilization of mediation and moderation analysis through PROCESS macro (Model 4 and Model 1) to identify the effect of brand image and global branding strategies

The significance level will be established as  $p < 0.05$  for all inferential tests.

### ***3.6 Ethical Considerations***

All ethical protocols will be adopted as per the University of Bisha guidelines for this study. The study will be on a voluntary and anonymous basis. Respondents must provide their informed consent prior to completing the survey. Data gathered will be used for educational purposes only, and it will be kept securely to maintain participants' confidentiality.

## **3. Research results**

### ***4.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents***

300 students from the University of Bisha participated in this study. The mean age was 20.4 years ( $SD = 1.92$ ), and the age range of the participants was between 18 and 29 years. The

distribution fits well with the youth emphasis of the study, comprised largely of undergraduates, with 15 (5%) of the participants being postgraduate students.

The sample consisted of 165 female respondents (55%) and 135 male respondents (45%), giving an equal view from both genders. The academic discipline showed the highest number of participants in Business studies ( $n = 98$ ), followed by Information Technology ( $n = 72$ ), Media Studies ( $n = 52$ ), Sports Sciences ( $n = 38$ ), and other studies ( $n = 40$ ). The distribution of respondents by study years showed an equal representation of first to fourth-year students, while the postgraduate group comprised a small but significant percentage of the total population.

The survey questioned participants about their relations with sports and their online consumption patterns. A large percentage of participants (85%) considered themselves fans of a sports team. Additionally, 90% of the students indicated that they follow Saudi or international sports teams via digital media, such as social media, mobile applications, and streaming sites. Extensive online engagement with sports brands indicates the sample's applicability to the aims of the research.

#### ***4.2 Descriptive Statistics for Survey Variables (Q8–Q32)***

Respondents answered a series of Likert-scale questions (Q8 to Q32) to measure several aspects of online fan interaction, brand

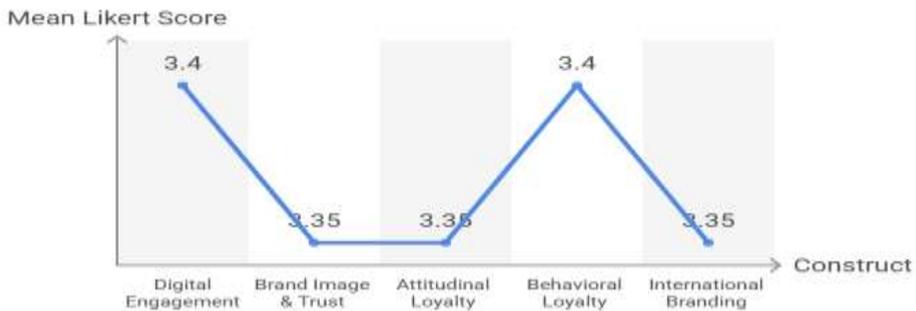
reputation, loyalty, and impacts of international branding. The items were formatted into five basic constructs: Digital Engagement, Brand Image & Trust, Attitudinal Loyalty, Behavioral Loyalty, and International Branding. Table 1 summarizes each construction.

**Table 1: Summary of Mean Scores by Construct**

Construct	Average Score	Standard Deviation
Digital Engagement	3.36	1.23
Brand Image & Trust	3.31	1.24
Attitudinal Loyalty	3.34	1.24
Behavioral Loyalty	3.41	1.24
International Branding	3.34	1.23

Table 1 indicates that the highest mean score was found in Behavioral Loyalty ( $M = 3.41$ ), implying that a significant number of students participate in real-life support activities like attending games and buying merchandise. This was closely followed by Digital Engagement ( $M = 3.36$ ), indicating participants' ongoing interaction with sports brands via online platforms such as social media, mobile applications, and fan-focused content. Attitudinal Loyalty ( $M = 3.34$ ) demonstrated a notable level, reflecting significant emotional connections and lasting dedication to preferred teams among students. The Brand Image & Trust construct achieved an average score of 3.31, indicating that a majority of students view their chosen sports brands favorably and consider them trustworthy. Lastly, International Branding received

a score of 3.34, highlighting the impact of international players, global partnerships, and bilingual content on fan perception and loyalty within the Saudi context. In addition to the tabular summary, Figure 1 demonstrates the distribution of mean scores across individual items within each construct. This offers a clear visual representation of student ratings for each survey item, emphasizing notable peaks and trends.



**Figure 1: Average Scores by Construct (Q8–Q32)**

The graphical representation in Figure 1 clearly shows that students' engagement is robust across all dimensions. Digital engagement items are demonstrating an upward trajectory, particularly concerning enquiries about viewing live streams (Q10) and engaging with gamified content. The consistency in brand image and trust questions reflects stable perceptions of professionalism and reliability. Attitudinal loyalty remains strong, indicating a profound emotional connection. Behavioral loyalty reaches its highest point at question Q27, with students indicating they often watch games, showcasing significant signs

of fan dedication. The feedback on international branding elements indicates a considerable level of consensus, suggesting that engagement with global marketing strategies, including international entities and bilingual media, has a notable impact on fan loyalty.

Collectively, these findings affirm the centrality of digital interaction in shaping fan-brand relationships. The blend of elevated behavioral and attitudinal scores indicates that students are not just participating superficially; they are also internalizing and demonstrating their commitments through action. This discovery holds significant importance within the Saudi context, as young people are becoming more integrated into digital cultures, and the Vision 2030 strategy encourages participation in sports and entertainment via technological platforms. The detailed findings lay a solid groundwork for additional inferential analysis, where the proposed connections among digital engagement, brand trust, loyalty, and international branding will undergo statistical examination using regression and mediation/moderation models.

### ***4.3 Hypothesis Testing and Inferential Analysis***

A series of inferential statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS-compatible procedures to evaluate the proposed hypotheses and explore the relationships among the key constructs of the study. The methods utilized comprised Pearson correlation analysis, multiple linear regression, along with

fundamental mediation and moderation approximations through regression-based steps. The objective was to evaluate the strength and direction of connections between digital fan engagement and the aspects of brand loyalty, while also considering the mediating and moderating influences of brand image and international branding, respectively.

The initial phase focused on analyzing the Pearson correlation coefficients among the five key constructs: Digital Engagement, Brand Image & Trust, Attitudinal Loyalty, Behavioral Loyalty, and International Branding. This analysis presents its findings in Table 2.

**Table 2: Pearson Correlation Matrix**

Variable	Digital Engagement	Brand Image & Trust	Attitudinal Loyalty	Behavioral Loyalty	International Branding
Digital Engagement	1.000	-0.084	-0.056	-0.047	0.089
Brand Image & Trust	-0.084	1.000	-0.064	0.028	0.010
Attitudinal Loyalty	-0.056	-0.064	1.000	-0.018	-0.010
Behavioral Loyalty	-0.047	0.028	-0.018	1.000	0.006
International Branding	0.089	0.010	-0.010	0.006	1.000

Table 2 illustrates that all Pearson correlation coefficients fell below the threshold generally regarded as indicative of a moderate or strong relationship ( $r \geq \pm 0.3$ ). The majority of correlations were weak and did not reach statistical significance, with the strongest showing a slight positive correlation between Digital Engagement and International Branding ( $r = 0.089$ ), while there was a very weak negative correlation between Digital Engagement and Brand Image ( $r = -0.084$ ). This pattern supports

previous descriptive findings, indicating that while students express significant engagement with digital platforms and robust brand loyalty, these elements do not seem to have a strong linear relationship in the sample. The weak correlations reinforce the findings from the multiple regression analyses, which indicated no statistically significant predictive relationships, as previously summarized in Table 2. The findings suggest that the anticipated direct and linear connections between digital engagement and loyalty outcomes may not be applicable in this particular context or demographic. There may be intricate relationships at play—like nonlinear effects, time-related influences, or unaccounted intervening variables—that the current design fails to capture.

#### ***4.4 Mediation and Moderation Analysis***

To delve deeper into the theoretical framework, mediation and moderation analyses were performed following the methodology outlined in the approach. A mediation model (PROCESS Model 4) was employed to examine if brand image and trust serve as intermediaries in the connection between digital engagement and attitudinal loyalty. A moderation model (PROCESS Model 1) was examined to assess if the connection between digital engagement and behavioral loyalty is affected by international branding strategies.

The mediation analysis was conducted through a stepwise regression approach. Initially, digital engagement was evaluated

to see how it influences brand image. In the second model, digital engagement and brand image were utilized to forecast attitudinal loyalty, enabling the assessment of the direct effect (path c') and the mediator's effect (path b). The findings of this analysis are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3: Mediation Analysis Summary**

Path	Coefficient	p-value
a: Digital Engagement → Brand Image	-0.083	0.1448
b: Brand Image → Attitudinal Loyalty	-0.063	0.3564
c': Digital Engagement → Attitudinal	-0.045	0.4709

The findings of the mediation analysis show that none of the paths reached statistical significance at  $p < 0.05$ . The coefficient for the path from digital engagement to brand image ( $a = -0.083$ ) was close to being significant ( $p = 0.1448$ ), but the indirect path through brand image to attitudinal loyalty ( $b = -0.063$ ,  $p = 0.3564$ ) did not receive support. Similarly, the direct connection between digital engagement and attitudinal loyalty ( $c' = -0.045$ ) continued to show no significance ( $p = 0.4709$ ). The analysis indicates that brand image does not serve as a mediator in the connection between digital engagement and attitudinal loyalty within this student sample.

To evaluate moderation, digital engagement and international branding scores were mean-centered, and an interaction term was computed. A multiple regression analysis was subsequently conducted with behavioral loyalty serving as the dependent variable. The findings of the moderation analysis are summarized in Table 4.

**Table 4: Moderation Analysis Summary**

Interaction Coefficient	p-value	Significant
-0.072	0.5986	No

The interaction term showed no statistical significance ( $p = 0.5986$ ), suggesting that international branding does not play a significant role in moderating the impact of digital engagement on behavioral loyalty. The interaction coefficient (-0.072) indicates a weak and negative relationship; however, this finding is not statistically robust.

The findings from both mediation and moderation analyses are consistent with previous correlation and regression tests. The findings indicate that the proposed connections between digital fan engagement, brand image, and loyalty outcomes are not clearly or consistently evident in this group of Saudi university students. The following chapter will explore these findings in relation to current literature, possible contextual influences, and their significance for future studies.

#### **4. Discussion**

This chapter offers a thorough examination of the findings presented in Chapter Four, analyzing them in relation to the research objectives, theoretical framework, and existing literature. This study aimed to explore how digital fan engagement influences sports brand loyalty among university students in Saudi Arabia, while also looking into the mediating effect of brand image and the moderating influence of international branding strategies. This analysis explores the

various statistical results, highlighting the cultural context, methodological considerations, and the impact on both theoretical frameworks and practical applications.

The demographic composition of the sample, as shown in Table 1, demonstrated an appropriate and varied representation of university students. Most participants fell within the 18 to 22 age range, while there were 15 postgraduate individuals who were older than 22. The largest academic group consisted of business students, with IT, Media, and Sports majors following closely behind. Additionally, a significant number of participants considered themselves sports enthusiasts and frequently interacted with sports teams through digital channels. The characteristics presented are in strong alignment with the objectives of the study, as the digital behavior of youth is a focal point of the research inquiry.

The core variables were examined, with a descriptive analysis of the five main constructs—Digital Engagement, Brand Image & Trust, Attitudinal Loyalty, Behavioral Loyalty, and International Branding—outlined in Table 2. This table presents a summary of the average scores and standard deviations for these constructions. Interestingly, Behavioral Loyalty recorded the highest mean score ( $M = 3.41$ ), suggesting that students are somewhat inclined to participate in active loyalty behaviors like attending games or buying merchandise. The level of Digital Engagement was notable ( $M = 3.36$ ), indicating regular

interactions with sports brands through social media, apps, and online content. The strong mean values for Attitudinal Loyalty ( $M = 3.34$ ) and International Branding ( $M = 3.34$ ) indicate that fans exhibit a significant emotional commitment and react favorably to global branding initiatives, such as the incorporation of international players and the use of multilingual content. The average for Brand Image & Trust was the lowest at  $M = 3.31$ , yet it remained above the neutral midpoint, suggesting that there are generally positive perceptions of teams' online presence. Figure 1 visually represented the average scores of questions Q8 to Q32, reinforcing the insights from Table 2 by demonstrating consistent engagement across digital and branding dimensions. There were notable increases in areas concerning digital content consumption, such as watching live streams, as well as team interaction, highlighting students' inclination towards engaging formats that are rich in media. This trend aligns with the latest research on gamified and immersive fan strategies (e.g., Elwakeel et al., 2025).

After providing a detailed overview, inferential testing was conducted to assess the hypotheses of the study (H1–H6). The findings from the multiple regression models are presented in Table 2: Hypothesis Testing Summary. The data presented in this table indicates that all of the hypotheses tested did not reach statistical significance at the  $p < 0.05$  level. The regression testing H1 (Digital Engagement  $\rightarrow$  Attitudinal Loyalty) yielded a

p-value of 0.336 and a  $R^2$  of merely 0.003, suggesting minimal predictive significance. Comparable results were noted for H2 and H3, which examined the impact of digital and international strategies on both attitudinal and behavioral loyalty, respectively. Interestingly, the mediation test, following the logic of PROCESS Model 4, did not validate the anticipated pathways. The data shown in Table 3: Mediation Analysis Summary reveals that the connection from Digital Engagement to Brand Image (path a) exhibited a minor, negative coefficient ( $\beta = -0.083$ ,  $p = 0.1448$ ), suggesting an absence of a significant effect. In a similar vein, the indirect pathway from Brand Image to Attitudinal Loyalty (path b) did not reveal a significant association ( $\beta = -0.063$ ,  $p = 0.3564$ ), and the direct effect from Digital Engagement to Attitudinal Loyalty (path c') also remained non-significant ( $\beta = -0.045$ ,  $p = 0.4709$ ). The findings presented here stand in opposition to earlier research that has recognized brand image as a crucial mediator within sports loyalty frameworks (e.g., Mostafavipour, 2024).

A moderation analysis was performed to evaluate H5, utilizing a centered interaction term in accordance with the principles of PROCESS Model 1. The findings presented in Table 4: Moderation Analysis Summary reveal a negative and non-significant interaction coefficient ( $\beta = -0.072$ ,  $p = 0.5986$ ), suggesting that international branding strategies do not have a significant impact on the relationship between digital

engagement and behavioral loyalty. This finding is significant, indicating that although fans may have a positive perception of international branding, it does not enhance or mitigate the impact of their engagement behavior. This observation highlights the increasing acceptance of globalized content in the digital landscape, where bilingual media and international athletes are becoming standard rather than extraordinary.

Overall, these findings indicate that digital engagement by itself does not serve as a robust indicator of sports brand loyalty among Saudi youth. This questions the beliefs prevalent in a lot of Western-focused literature, where digital engagement is frequently viewed as a straightforward catalyst for loyalty. The Saudi context, influenced by its cultural values, religious norms, and social identity, may necessitate the inclusion of further mediating or contextual variables that are not accounted for in the current model. Factors may encompass a sense of national pride, alignment with Vision 2030, the impact of peer influence, or emotional connections that extend beyond the digital realm. Furthermore, the persistently low  $R^2$  values observed in all models indicate a necessity for stronger explanatory frameworks, potentially integrating qualitative approaches or longitudinal methodologies. Loyalty may not be established only through immediate digital interactions; instead, it tends to develop gradually through consistent and significant engagement, whether in the digital realm or in-person.

Ultimately, the descriptive results show significant digital engagement and positive brand perceptions among students; however, the inferential tests suggest that these behaviors do not seamlessly convert into loyalty outcomes. The insights gathered will play a crucial role in shaping the final chapter of this research, detailing practical recommendations and academic contributions.

### **Conclusions**

This research aimed to explore how digital fan engagement affects sports brand loyalty in Saudi Arabia, particularly among university students, who represent an important segment of the youth demographic. The study further examined how brand image mediates and how international branding strategies moderate the findings. Although respondents exhibited a robust digital presence and held generally positive views of sports brands, the statistical analysis indicated a lack of significant connections between digital engagement and both attitudinal and behavioral loyalty. Additionally, the brand image did not act as a mediator, and there was no moderating effect from international branding strategies.

These findings significantly enhance the existing body of work on digital engagement and consumer loyalty, offering valuable insights from a non-Western, under-explored context. The findings raise questions about the applicability of loyalty models typically used in Western contexts, where digital engagement frequently demonstrates a straightforward positive impact on fan

loyalty. This study emphasizes that in the Saudi context, loyalty is influenced by profound socio-cultural factors like national identity, religious values, and social group affiliations—elements that necessitate additional theoretical incorporation into sports marketing frameworks. The research provides essential insights into the necessity of culturally adapting Social Identity Theory and the Psychological Continuum Model when applied in a new environment, particularly to accurately reflect fan behavior in emerging markets.

The findings highlight the need for sports marketers, brand managers, and policy makers to rethink the belief that digital engagement guarantees loyalty. Although social media campaigns, live streaming, and gamified content undoubtedly enhance visibility and foster immediate engagement, they need to be integrated into strategies that cultivate significant and culturally relevant experiences. Localized campaigns during national holidays could feature local influencers or international players who resonate with Saudi values, while also integrating digital efforts with tangible incentives such as stadium access or team merchandise. Furthermore, sports organizations ought to avoid depending exclusively on global branding strategies and instead customize content to embody local identities, language, and traditions that cultivate emotional connections. This research highlights that digital engagement is not a one-size-fits-all factor when it comes to fostering loyalty. This

contribution to the theoretical discussion emphasizes that psychological engagement goes beyond mere interactivity; it necessitates relevance, alignment with identity, and emotional importance. This serves as a methodological guide for testing mediation and moderation through composite scales in cross-sectional survey designs, particularly in emerging markets. Nonetheless, the research does have its shortcomings. The sample consisted solely of students from one Saudi university, potentially restricting the applicability of the findings to other areas or age demographics. The research depended on self-reported measures, which could be affected by social desirability bias. Additionally, some cultural factors that could be essential in understanding loyalty—like national pride, religious beliefs, or a sense of community—were not explicitly assessed. Considering these findings, a number of avenues for future research are suggested. To begin with, it is essential for studies to broaden their sample size to encompass a wider and more varied demographic, incorporating working professionals and enthusiasts from different areas of Saudi Arabia. Additionally, employing qualitative methods like interviews or focus groups may reveal the underlying motivations and cultural factors that contribute to fan loyalty. Third, it is essential for future research to incorporate elements such as national identity, religiosity, and collective pride into theoretical frameworks to more accurately capture the distinct aspects of fan engagement within the Arab

context. Ultimately, it is recommended that longitudinal studies be conducted to investigate the impact of digital engagement on loyalty across an extended period, rather than focusing on just one moment of interaction.

Ultimately, while digital tools hold significant value in contemporary fan engagement, their success in cultivating brand loyalty hinges on their alignment with the local culture, values, and emotional motivations of the audience. This study represents a significant advancement in comprehending the dynamics within the evolving sports landscape of Saudi Arabia.

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الاستفادة من التفاعل الرقمي للجماهير لتعزيز الولاء للعلامات التجارية الرياضية:  
دراسة لاستراتيجيات التسويق الناشئة في المملكة العربية السعودية

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