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Exploring fans' social identities, emotional attachment and subjective identity: A social identity approach to Italian football consumer-brand identity

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Abstract

Frame of the research. *Emotions are crucial elements in sports spectatorship and understanding in-depth how they characterized stakeholders' experiences is crucial for better addressing marketing and communication strategies.*

Purpose of the paper. *Adopting the social identity approach, this study explores the intense role of emotional attachment in football fans concerning the identification with the team (i.e. fanship) and with the fellow fans (i.e. fandom); fans' subjective well-being perceptions is also investigated here.*

Methodology. *22 semi-structured interviews were individually conducted with fans of two Italian Serie A teams. Both convenience and snowball sampling were performed to recruit diverse participants. A manual coding was conducted via NVivo 14 software.*

Results. *No major discrepancies between fans of the two teams were observed in terms of fanship, except for a sense of higher identification with the city for fans of the team sharing the name with the hometown. Although one team expressed more considerations relatively to other fellow fans, these considerations were frequently oriented to detaching from specific political sub-groups. Fans of both teams underline both the positive and negative emotions attached to the beloved teams; obsessive and irrational attitudes are highlighted and refer to the feeling of feeling protected and safe with respect to the problems of daily life (i.e., sheltered) and the need to vent.*

Managerial implications. *Understanding how fans personally communicate their distinct identifications either with the team or with the surrounding fan community as well as the peculiarities of their emotional attachment to the team might be highly beneficial for marketers and managers working in the football industry.*

Originality of the paper. *This study investigates both fanship and fandom and explores the role of emotions in team identification through in-depth qualitative research methods. Furthermore, it fills the gaps concerning team identification research in the Italian football-centric sports system.*

Key words: *social identity approach; fanship; fandom; brand identity; emotional attachment to the team; subjective well-being.*

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1. Theoretical Background

1.1 Social identity approach, sports fanship and fandom

Drawing from both self-categorization and social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), the Social Identity Approach (SIA) assumes that individuals internally aim for their self-concept to be favourable. Since personal and social identities coexist within the self-concept, groups are crucial social platform for this aspiration; more precisely, the self-concept is shaped and enriched by social identities emerging from memberships in groups in which individuals feel and desire to belong to (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). According to the SIA, group identity is defined as “that part of the individuals’ self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group/s together with the value and emotional significance of that membership” (Tajfel, 1981 p. 255). This description of social identities evokes (a) the cognitive, (b) the evaluative, and (c) the emotional dimension of group identification.

Groups are distinguishable if four criteria are met: (a) a common identity is perceived to be shared; (b) a perception of being part of the same collective is shared as well; (c) interchangeability with other members is perceived; (d) two or more individuals are in line with the previous points (Turner *et al.*, 1987). Activating the relative identity, group membership, participation and activities enhance the possibility for members to distinguish from out-group individuals and stimulating the creation of ‘us’ and ‘them’ identification divide.

Within the broader sports industry, teams and relative fan communities are evident examples of groups as interpreted by the SIA (Reysen *et al.*, 2017, 2022; Reysen & Branscombe, 2010). Specifically, the way individuals feel connected to their beloved teams has been investigated through the theoretical lenses of the SIA, recognizing team identification as a proper group identity (Inoue *et al.*, 2017, 2019; Lock *et al.*, 2014; Lock & Heere, 2017); indeed, in the last three decades, team identification research has captured relevant academic attention in the sports management and marketing field (Lock & Heere, 2017) in relation to an extremely wide variety of variables including among other: (a) brand loyalty (Bauer *et al.*, 2005, 2008; Sato *et al.*, 2023); (b) perceived emotions and emotional support (Biscaia *et al.*, 2012; Inoue *et al.*, 2019). (a) fans’ wellbeing (Inoue *et al.*, 2017, 2019; Yoshida *et al.*, 2023).

When applying the SIA, different sport consumer researchers place significant emphasis on the two-folded conceptualization of fan-team and fan-to-fan identifications (Lock & Heere, 2017). Reysen and Branscombe (2010) found a correlation and distinguished between fanship (degree of identification with the team) and fandom (degree of identification with fellow fans and the broader fan community of the team); particularly, the authors assumed fanship to be a personal identity - supported by the personal connection to the team according to the authors - and fandom to be a group identity. Different works from Reysen and colleagues found positive correlations between fandom and different forms of well-being (e.g., subjective, and psychological) (Reysen *et al.*, 2017, 2022). Although referring to attachment conceptualization, Yoshida and colleagues (2015b) reported a positive association between fans’ bonding with the surrounding fan community and behavioural loyalty.

Differently from previous works (Reysen *et al.*, 2017, 2022; Reysen & Branscombe, 2010), we argue that reflecting fanship the most traditional understanding of team identification both fanship and fandom shall consider group identities. For the purposes of the current research, the labels of the two constructs will be retained, notwithstanding the theory-based different proposition. Group identities are here conceptualized as multidimensional in nature and be composed of behavioural involvement, cognitive awareness, interdependence and self in public and private evaluation. This study answers to previous call for further investigation of and comparison between fanship and fandom (Reysen *et al.*, 2022). Extant literature lacks a qualitative exploration of the two constructs and an extensive understanding of fanship and fandom within the Italian sport fan context; the current study aims at filling these gaps.

1.2 SIA, emotional attachment and subjective well-being in sports industry

SIA posits that group identification involves a significant degree of emotional value and significance (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and that as the identification with the group increases so does the degree of emotional attachment to the group (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Paxton & Moody, 2003). Groups are deemed to offer opportunities for consumers to fulfil emotional attachment needs which are complementary to needs of belonging to a group (or brand) (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Emotional attachment to a team appears to consist in: (a) the cognitive involvement of an individual toward the group (i.e., investment); and (b) the emotional perceptions received from the group (i.e., dividend) (Dwyer *et al.*, 2015; Paxton & Moody, 2003).

Emotional attachment is a supporting element in the identification process of sports fans with a team or more broadly with a sports-related consumptive object. Indeed, in the Psychological Continuum Model (Funk & James, 2001) attachment is a fundamental stage in fans' cognitive connection to the team, with affective dimensions distinguishing attraction from attachment.

Furthermore, perceived emotions are crucial elements in the development of the emotional attachment of sports fans (Dwyer *et al.*, 2015; Paxton & Moody, 2003). Several empirical studies affirm the impact of discrete emotions (Biscaia *et al.*, 2012) and emotional support (Inoue *et al.*, 2019) on the relationship fanship and well-being. Inoue and colleagues (2017) noted that life satisfaction is influenced by both sports event attendance and emotional support mediating team identification. Inoue, Wann, Lock and colleagues (2019) observed that, together with sense of belonging, SWB was enhanced by perceived emotional support among American older adults; in turn, fanship and match attendance were investigated and confirmed as drivers of emotional support perceptions (Inoue *et al.*, 2019).

Being group identification and membership driven by self-esteem-enhancing desires (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1982), the positive association between sports-related fanship and socio-psychological wellbeing does not come as a surprise (Wann, 2006; Inoue 2017, 2019). Importantly, it has been underlined the crucial mediating role of social activities and interactions (e.g. live game attendance) in strengthening of this association (Inoue *et al.*, 2017, 2019; Reysen *et al.*, 2017, 2022; Wann, 2006). These findings support the SIA-based research on health and well-being which is grounded on the concept that group and relative identifications provide psychological resources and mechanisms (including related experiential opportunities) for coping with detrimental, stressful, or disastrous situations (Jetten *et al.*, 2017)

Concerning fandom, earlier work from Reysen and Branscombe (2010) indicated a positive correlation between both fanship and fandom with happiness perceptions; however, recent research found only fandom to significantly associate with psychological well-being through the mediation of friendship volume and participating in social activities (Reysen *et al.* 2022).

Since Reysen and colleagues (2022) highlighted the research gap surrounding fandom and well-being, this research aims at extending this line of research by qualitatively exploring not only fandom-but also fanship-induced well-being perceptions. Moreover, the current study answers previous calls for expanding the scientific knowledge concerning sports fans' emotional attachment to the team and the relative connections with their identification processes (Dwyer *et al.*, 2015)

1.3 Brand identification, emotional attachment to the brand and consumer well-being

Drawing both from the SIA, a line of research has been exploring the connections between fanship, fandom and brand identification (Heere *et al.*, 2011; Heere & James, 2007; Yoshida *et al.* 2015a, 2015b). In the beginning, this research stream focused on the effects of multiple associated group identities on fanship and consequential behavioural outcomes (Heere *et al.*, 2011; Heere & James, 2007). Furthermore, different works have explored antecedents and consequences of fan community identification (in this study, fandom) (Yoshida *et al.* 2015a, 2015b). In the contexts of Japanese professional football and baseball, fan community identification had a significant association with

team brand equity and four behavioural consequences: positive word-of mouth, fan community engagement, member responsibility, and customized product use (Yoshida *et al.*, 2015a).

Bauer and colleagues (2005; 2008) found that football club fanship stands as most significant symbolic brand benefit predicting loyal attitudes toward the team brand (2005). Stadium attendance, news media consumption, club-related merchandise purchasing and wearing club colours appeared to be the most consistent loyal among football fans (2008). The specific motions connected to football brands need to be considered as key experiential benefits (Bauer 2005; 2008).

Furthermore, rooted in attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982), brand attachment has been conceptualized and investigated as “an emotion-laden target-specific bond” between a consumer and a brand (Thomson *et al.*, 2005) p. 78). Previous studies identified a strengthening effect of emotional attachment to the brand in the relationship between brand identification and customer loyalty (Hallberg, 2003). In particular, in conditions of high cognitive investment with a club is expected to positively influence consistent behavioural loyalty suggesting an irrational, sacrifice-like engagement to the team (Dwyer *et al.*, 2015; Ladhari *et al.*, 2015).

Loyal behaviours of consumers were found to be predicted by the interaction between consumers’ identification with the brand and satisfaction with the sports products and services (Bodet & Bernache-Assollant, 2011; Matsuoka *et al.*, 2003). Satisfied consumers tend to witness high level of consumer well-being (Lee *et al.*, 2002) and, in turn, engage more with the brand. Being spectatorship fundamentally based on experiential products and services, these last considerations are heavily amplified among identified fans. Indeed, Sato and colleagues (2023) recently investigated the relationship football fans’ identification with supported brands and perceived happiness. Findings underlined a positive association particularly through direct event experience (Sato *et al.*, 2023). Similarly, a study focusing on football fans in Portuguese La Liga reported a positive direct association between feelings of joy and advantageous behavioural intentions towards the team (Biscaia *et al.*, 2012); satisfaction and behaviours were found positively associated as well. (Biscaia *et al.*, 2012).

This study draws from existing literature for exploring football brand identification and brand fan community as intertwined with fanship and fandom and interacting with fans’ emotional attachment to the team (brand) and well-being. In particular, it is in the purpose of this research to identify specific emotions attached to football brands and how these emotions affect the shared perception of clubs (Lee *et al.*, 2018).

1.4 Football fans in Italy

In the Italian sports context, football represents by far the most practiced sport with 26% of registered athletes belonging to the Federazione Italiana Giuoco Calcio (FIGC) (CONI, 2020). This percentage places Italy well above (by 17 percentage points) the average interest of the populations of the thirteen major world nations/economies (FIGC, 2023). Within the approximately 34 million stakeholders, just over 24 million are people who can call themselves ‘fans’ (Stage Up/Ipsos, 2023). It seems clear, then, how in Italy soccer no longer represents just a game but has become a form of culture and impersonation of values and bonds, not forgetting the relational aspect that makes it an easy topic of discussion in any context (Deloitte, 2023). In addition, this sport creates a strong bond between the people, the territory, and the communities in which the fan and his or her team fit. Ultimately, this sector has a significant socio-economic impact benefiting the country Italy, which can be estimated at over 4.5 billion euros, with total direct revenues of 5 billion euros and an estimated impact on GDP of over 11.1 billion euros (FIGC, 2023).

2. Research questions

Building on the assumptions just reviewed, we asked the following research questions:

1. How do fans describe themselves in terms of fanship and fandom? Which are the common

features?

2. In terms of emotional attachment, how do football fans perceive to emotionally invest in and receive from the supported team?
3. What are the emotions associated with the identified team/brand)?
4. How do football fans describe themselves in terms of subjective well-being (SWB)?

3. Methods

We used an exploratory, qualitative study design based on the administration of semi-structured interviews. Italian SS Lazio and AS Roma fans were interviewed on topics such as identity, emotional attachment, and well-being. Participants were recruited using the convenience sampling method and then using the snowball sampling. Table 1 shows participants recruited by convenience methodology as known (K) and those recruited by snowball methodology as unknown (U). Beginning in March 2023, fans were contacted direct call and were informed about the research information and how the interview was administered. Those contacted were asked not to provide a telephone response, but to send confirmation of willingness to participate by message. Of the thirty people contacted, nineteen agreed to be interviewed, while the other eleven declined the invitation or sent no message. Since January 2024, to equalize the number of interviews between the two groups analysed, a message was sent to an additional four AS Roma fans using the previously mentioned methodologies; three of them responded positively and the second step of interviews could then proceed.

3.1 Sampling and Participant

In the framework outlined above on the Italian sports context, we decided to interview SS Lazio and AS Roma fans who together, in the 2022/2023 season, represent about 10% of the total number of fans in Italy (SS Lazio fans: 684,000; AS Roma fans: 1,804,000) (Stage Up/Ipsos, 2023). The choice of these two clubs was dictated by several factors. First, as we have seen, SS Lazio and AS Roma are two of the top six teams by number of fans in Italy. The two selected clubs, being from Rome, therefore share the same environment and community representing a valid element to compare the two groups of fans. Both, then, share a similar sports history of few victories: SS Lazio, born in 1900, has won a total of 17 national and international trophies, while AS Roma, born in 1927, 18 national and international trophies. They do, however, have in common that they won their last Scudetto at the turn of the 2000s, in the 1999-2000 and 2000-2001 seasons, respectively. These commonalities are contrasted by some differences that have emerged in recent decades: in particular, SS Lazio has been led since 2004 by Italian businessman Claudio Lotito, while AS Roma since the 2011-2012 season has alternated between different groups of U.S. businessmen as owners.

The 22 participants who agreed to participate in the study are fans born and raised in the province of Rome. At the occupational level, among the respondents we have: eleven full-time employees, two part-time employees, two part-time independent contractor employees, one full-time independent contractor, three students, one freelance consultant, one freelance manager, and one sports contributor. Of the fans interviewed, sixteen were male and six were female, ranging in age from 22 to 64 years (mean age 35.4 years). The data of the participants and the date of their interview are shown in Table 1.

Tab. 1: Study participant

Participant Team/N°	Age	Gender	Known/Unknown	Occupation	Interview date
SS Lazio/1	28	M	K	Full-time employee	07/03/2023
SS Lazio/2	44	M	K	Full-time employee	07/05/2023
SS Lazio/3	29	F	K	Part-time/Independent contractor	07/05/2023
SS Lazio/4	31	M	K	Full-time employee	07/07/2023
SS Lazio/5	56	M	K	Independent contractor	07/08/2023
SS Lazio/6	56	F	K	Full-time employee	07-16-2023
SS Lazio/7	29	M	K	Full-time employee	07-19-2023
SS Lazio/8	28	M	K	Full-time employee	07-24-2023
SS Lazio/9	26	M	U	Student	10/08/2023
SS Lazio/10	50	M	U	Freelance/Consultant	10-16-2023
SS Lazio/11	52	M	U	Full-time employee	10-16-2023
AS Roma/1	29	M	K	Full-time employee	07/06/2023
AS Roma/2	58	M	K	Freelance manager	07/07/2023
AS Roma/3	64	M	K	Full-time employee	07/08/2023
AS Roma/4	26	F	K	Part-time employee	07/10/2023
AS Roma/5	28	M	U	Part-time employee	07/12/2023
AS Roma/6	26	F	U	Student	07-24-2023
AS Roma/7	22	F	U	Part-time/Independent contractor	08-16-2023
AS Roma/8	24	M	U	Student	08-16-2023
AS Roma/9	24	F	K	Full-time employee	01/09/2024
AS Roma/10	25	M	U	Full-time employee	01/09/2024
AS Roma/11	23	M	K	Sports associate	01/10/2024

Source: author' self-draft

3.2 Interview instrument

Semi-structured interviews were conducted for the study. The research team developed questions that reflected the themes analysed in line with the research questions. The questions were structured to learn about (1) participants' motivations for becoming a fan of their team, (2) the degree of personal identification with the team and identification with their team's fan community, (3) the degree of emotional attachment in terms of what one gives to the team and what one receives from the team, and (4) the level of well-being as a fan of their team and personally. All interviews were conducted between March 2023 and January 2024 by the first author except for the last three (all in January 2024) which were conducted by the second author. The second author had been able to follow up on the last four interviews conducted by the first author to improve consistency. All interviews lasted between 20 and 55 minutes and were conducted digitally in Italian through Microsoft Teams. The interviews were all conducted individually, except for the Rome/7 and Rome/8 interviews, which were conducted in pairs. Each interview was recorded with the participant's permission.

3.3 Content analysis

The interviews were transcribed by the first and second authors and then subjected to cross-review to assess any errors or structural differences.

For the analysis of the emotions that fans give to and receive from their team, a frequency analysis was performed following the 7-factor model proposed by Lee *et al.* (Lee *et al.*, 2018). In a first step, the authors transcribed the emotions into a table and then proceeded to classify them into the 7 categories indicated by the authors.

To analyse the content of the interviews, 13 categories describing each construct taken into analysis were identified in the literature divided as follows: six categories for the Social Identity theme, two for the Emotional Attachment theme, and five for the Subjective Well-Being theme. In a first stage, for each category, the authors identified, discussed, and coded several subcategories using NVivo14 qualitative data management software. In a second stage, one of the two authors proceeded to check all identified references to exclude typos or errors. In agreement with Pereira and colleagues (Pereira, 2021), each piece of content included in a subcategory is defined as an "answer unit". In a third stage, the authors proceeded to eliminate from the analysis those subcategories that were reported by less than 20 percent of the fans. The threshold for each subcategory is 5 out of 22 fans

had to have talked about it.

In the results section we present, explain, and exemplify the 13 categories and corresponding subcategories that constitute the analysis system. The frequency of coded data is also specified for each category.

4. Results

4.1 Data analysis and findings

A total of 355 answer units were coded, including 151 for the Social Identity construct, 135 for Emotional Attachment, and 69 for Subjective Well-Being. For each construct we will report tables with the total number of answer units in each category and subcategory and the number of fans whose answers are included in each subcategory.

4.2 Results on Social Identity and Discussion

This research relies on a multidimension conceptualization of group (and social) identity (Heere *et al.*, 2011); in line with data concerning fanship and fandom are here framed in terms of: (a) behavioural involvement; (b) cognitive awareness; (c) interconnection of self with the group; (d) private evaluation; (e) public evaluation; (f) sense of interdependence with the group. Table 2 (Tab. 2) schematizes the response units and the number of fans whose responses are included in each subcategory regarding the fanship construct. Table 3 (Tab. 3) does the same regarding the fandom construct.

Behavioural Involvement refers to “the degree to which an individual engages in actions that directly implicate the group identity” (Heere *et al.*, p.413). In both fanship and fandom two subcategories consistently emerged, namely *Group Participation* and *Stadium Attendance*. The former relates to the broad set of activities fans perceive to engage in the expression of their distinct social identities and this subcategory appears stable in both fanship (4 answer units in 3 Lazio fans, 2 answer units in 2 Roma fans) and fandom (1 answer units in 1 Lazio fan, 3 answer units in 3 Roma fans). *Stadium Attendance* was coded as the thematical set of considerations concerning the activities and involvement related to live game attendance. This subcategory appears strong in fanship-related behavioural involvement of fans transversally in both teams (4 answer units in 3 Lazio fans, 5 answer units in 4 Roma fans). Concerning fandom, *Stadium Attendance* subcategory emerged 4 times in 4 interviews with Roma fans and never with Lazio fans.

“To me supporting Roma is going there, being with the people at the stadium, with the people I love or with people I can even meet directly there” (Roma/6, Fandom, *Stadium Attendance*).

While Behavioural Involvement appears to retain rather similar connotations in both fanship and fandom, these constructs diverge in terms of *Cognitive Awareness*. The latter has been defined as “the general awareness (or knowledge) that an individual has of the group” (Heere *et al.*, p.413). In fact, if for the construct of fanship we find similar values in the subcategories of *Being part of something bigger*, that is, identifying oneself through the team in something bigger than the individual self (for both fans 2 answer units in 2 fans), and *Leadership*, that is, identifying oneself in team members with particular charisma (5 answer units in 3 Lazio fans, 4 answer units in 4 Roma fans), it is in fandom that we find the greatest differences. Here, in fact, Lazio fans declare a strong identification with the fan group by referring to a real sense of *Family* (11 answer units in 6 Lazio fans versus 4 answer units in 3 Roma fans). The subcategory *Being part of something bigger* was also coded in fandom but, again, without differences (2 answer units in 1 Lazio fan, 3 answer units in 3 Roma fans). Last, the subcategory of *Identity Change* was coded as referring to the possibility of changing one’s identity

as a fan due to personal or contextual factors. This subcategory does not show differences between the two fans (4 answer units in 2 Lazio fans, 3 answer units in 3 Roma fans), but it is interesting that more than 20% of the fans report this aspect.

“Usually, it works the other way around, because in your youth you are agitated and then as the years go by, when family, work and other difficulties take over it tends to decrease, but for me it wasn’t like that. Over the years, emotions have certainly increased” (Roma/3, Fanship, *Identity Change*)

“There is a union and this also enriches being together, with the family, which can also be social with the family, if it belonged to some group; let’s say my Lazio group, it’s more of a family group than the group it was when I was twenty years old when I went to the North, to the Curva group” (Lazio/11, Fandom, *Family*)

In the category *Interconnectedness of Self*, i.e. “the degree to which the individual feels the group is a part of him- or herself” (Heere *et al.*, p.413), reference answer units were coded, but these did not meet the inclusion threshold specified by the authors in the methodology.

According to Heere *et al.*, *Private Evaluation* refers to “the positive or negative attitude an individual personally has toward the group” (Heere *et al.*, p. 143). Concerning fanship, the response units for the subcategory of *Identity Change* are similar for the two fans (5 response units in 4 Lazio fans, 6 response units in 3 Roma fans), while we note significant differences in the subcategory *Sport Results*, which is the level of identification with the team based on sports results. As many as 8 Lazio fans (12 response units) state that their level of identification is related to the results achieved; this aspect is also present among Roma fans but with lower values (6 response units in 4 fans). For Roma fans, a strong element of identification in the team is closely related to the city of Rome. The *City Identification* category was coded at 12 response units for 7 Roma fans and in no case for Lazio fans. For what is identification with fellow supporters, i.e., fandom, Lazio fans report a significant *Minority/Majority* sentiment, i.e., that related to identification in a particular group caused by a minority or majority feeling compared to others; in fact, we find 9 response units in 4 Lazio fans, while no response units for Roma. Notably, the coded response units always refer to the sense of minority that Lazio fans perceive; this feeling is in line with the data on the number of soccer fans in Italy presented by Stage and Ipsos in August 2023, which place Lazio in sixth place overall (behind Juventus, Inter, Milan, Napoli, and Roma) with an estimated 684,000 fans (or about 3 percent of the total) (Stage Up/Ipsos, 2023). Of particular interest is the analysis of the subcategory *Outgroup Derogation*, i.e., the tendency to show negative, sometimes deviant behaviour toward members of an identified outgroup. From this point of view, in Lazio fans, 5 response units were coded in 5 different fans, compared to the single response unit in Roma fans. This aspect may be related to the minority sentiment mentioned earlier.

“Being a fan of A.S. Roma is like loving the city of Rome; for me the two things are profoundly related” (Roma/6, Fanship, *City Identification*).

“When I was a boy, we were always inferior in numbers. This thing gave me more pride the fact of being inferior in numbers.” (Lazio/11, Fandom, *Minority/Majority*).

“Lazio fans benefit from the club history and from being an historical multisport club; on the other hand, Roma fans are very attached to game results and hold absurd expectations which often are actually crazy. Roma fans are indeed only ordinary fans” (Lazio/4, Fandom, *Outgroup Derogation*).

Public Evaluation refers to “the perceived positive or negative attitude of non-members toward the groups by the individual” (Heere *et al.*, p.413). For the team identification aspect, Lazio and Roma fans also report a *Minority/Majority* feeling here. Referring to a different construct, this subcategory modifies its meaning by referring to identification in a particular team caused by a minority or majority feeling compared to other teams. With this meaning, the subcategory is minimally present for both fans (2 response units in 2 Lazio fans and 1 response unit in 1 Roma fan). Regarding fandom,

we find an interesting result. Lazio fans alone, in fact, declare a detachment from what are the group dynamics related to the fan group. In this sense, the subcategory *Detachment from the ultras*, was coded with 14 the response units in 4 fans, with references mainly to the extremist political current and their sexist behaviours within the curve.

“I feel like a Lazio fan, as everyone feels, but I don’t feel like it when we start talking about political ideology which unfortunately they put on the field in the stands every Sunday” (Lazio/1, Fandom, *Detachment from the ultras*)

The last category analysed is Sense of Interdependence with the Group, which is based on an ingroup members’ awareness of having a shared fate and belonging to the same social group (Heere and James 2007; Heere *et al.*, 2011). For the subcategory *Shared Fate*, which is when members of a group recognize that they have a common path and when they recognize that they are treated equally within the group, similar numbers were coded for the fanship construct (4 answer units in 2 Lazio fans and 3 answer units in 3 Roma fans). In the fandom construct, on the other hand, the aspect of sharing a common path and within the group is an element coded for Roma fanship only (4 answer units in 3 fans). It is evident, then, how both fans identify with their team’s path, while only the Roma fans identify with their own fan group. This aspect is in line with the analysis of the *Detachment from the ultras* subcategory done in the *Public Evaluation* category of the fandom construct.

In aggregate terms, for fans’ identification with their team (fanship), the answer units are similarly distributed (36 for Lazio fans and 43 for Roma fans). The main differences can be seen in the *Private Evaluation* category with Lazio fans identifying more with their team’s results and Roma fans identifying more with the strong connection in terms of name, colours, and symbols with their hometown. In contrast, regarding fans’ identification with the group (fandom), we note a clear prevalence of answer units in Lazio fans (46 for Lazio fans and 23 for Roma fans). This prevalence is generated in the *Private Evaluation* and *Public Evaluation* categories. Lazio fans state that their identification with the fan group depends on feeling that they are in a minority situation compared to other teams, plus they do not identify with the attitudes of other fan groups. At the same time, however, Lazio fans distance themselves from certain behaviours that part of their fan base disavows, such as joining political groups or sexist initiatives at the stadium.

Tab. 2: Social Identities - Fanship

Construct	Categories	SS Lazio		AS Roma	
		Subcategories	n° answer units/fans	Subcategories	n° answer units/fans
Social Identity - Fanship	Behavioural Involvement	1) <i>Group Participation</i>	4/3	1) <i>Group Participation</i>	2/2
		2) <i>Stadium Attendance</i>	4/3	2) <i>Stadium Attendance</i>	5/4
	Cognitive Awareness	1) <i>Being part of something bigger</i>	2/1	1) <i>Being part of something bigger</i>	2/1
		2) <i>Leadership</i>	5/3	2) <i>Leadership</i>	4/4
	Interconnection of Self	---	---	---	---
		1) <i>Identity Change</i>	5/4	1) <i>Identity Change</i>	6/3
	Private Evaluation	2) <i>Sport Results</i>	12/8	2) <i>Sport Results</i>	6/4
		3) <i>City Identification</i>		3) <i>City Identification</i>	
	Public Evaluation	1) <i>Minority/Majority</i>	2/2	1) <i>Minority/Majority</i>	12/7
		1) <i>Shared Fate</i>	4/2	1) <i>Shared Fate</i>	1/1
Sens of Interdependence				3/3	
		Subtotal of answer units	36	Subtotal of answer units	43

Source: author’ self-draft

Tab. 3: Social Identities - Fandom

Construct	Categories	SS Lazio		AS Roma	
		Subcategories	n° answer units/fans	Subcategories	n° answer units/fans
Social Identity - Fandom	Behavioural Involvement	1) <i>Group Participation</i>	1/1	1) <i>Group Participation</i> 2) <i>Stadium Attendance</i>	3/3
					4/4
	Cognitive Awareness	1) <i>Being part of something bigger</i>	2/1	1) <i>Being part of something bigger</i>	3/3
		2) <i>Family</i>	11/6	2) <i>Family</i>	
		3) <i>Identity Change</i>		3) <i>Identity Change</i>	4/3
	Interconnection of Self		4/2		3/3
	Private Evaluation	1) <i>Outgroup Derogation</i>	5/5	1) <i>Outgroup Derogation</i>	1/1
		2) <i>Minority/Majority</i>			
	Public Evaluation	1) <i>Detachment from the Ultras</i>	9/4		
			14/4		
Sens of Interdependence		----	1) <i>Shared Fate</i>	4/3	
		Subtotal of answer units	46	Subtotal of answer units	23

Source: author' self-draft

4.3 Results on Emotional Attachment and Discussion

As outlined in theoretical review, emotional attachment to the team has been framed in terms of two factors which this works refers to, namely emotional investment and dividend (Dwyer *et al.* 2015). Emotional investment consists of the “cognitive feelings a fan puts into the team” (Dwyer *et al.* 2015, p. 575). From this point of view, as visualized in Table 4 (Tab. 4) there was a greater investment of feelings by Lazio fans with 54 answer units compared to 33 by Roma fans. The answer units were coded into 3 subcategories.

Tab. 4: Emotional Attachment - Investment

Construct	Category	SS Lazio		AS Roma	
		Subcategories	n° answer units/fans	Subcategories	n° answer units/fans
Emotional Attachment	Investment	1) <i>Game-Related</i>	12/5	1) <i>Game-Related</i>	18/7
		• Pre-Game	7/4	• Pre-Game	
		• In-Game	4/3	• In-Game	7/4
		• Post-Game	1/1	• Post-Game	4/3
		2) <i>Group-Related</i>		2) <i>Group-Related</i>	7/4
		• Stadium Attendance	7/4	• Stadium Attendance	
		• Group Participation		• Group Participation	5/3
		3) <i>Person-Related</i>	5/3	3) <i>Person-Related</i>	
		• Obsession	2/2	• Obsession	3/1
		• Time		• Time	2/2
		• Expectations	35/10	• Expectations	
					10/6
				22/7	
				7/4	4/3
		6/3	2/2		
		Subtotal of answer units	54	Subtotal of answer units	33

Source: author' self-draft

The first subcategory is *Game-Related* and to team results, that is, the feelings that each fan feels invested in their team before, during, or after a game or after a series of specific results or events. As can be seen from Table 4, the difference between the two fans (12 answer units in 5 Lazio fans, 18 answer units in 7 Roma fans) is due to an involvement of Roma fans in the *Post-Game* phases, while in the *Pre-Game* and *In-Game* phases the response units do not differ.

“The match is a situation where you can allow yourself to rejoice and suffer freely, not like in other social contexts” (Roma/1, *In-Game*)

The second coded subcategory is related to *Group-Related* emotional investment, that is, the feelings each fan shows toward their team in relation to group involvement situations. In this subcategory we note a slight majority of answer units in Lazio fans (7 answer units in 4 Lazio fans, 5 answer units in 3 Roma fans). *Group Participation* dynamics do not differ, while Lazio fans invest feelings when experiencing stadium dynamics (*Stadium Attendance*).

“There are emotions I felt at the stadium that I would have a hard time describing to you, but I haven’t felt those emotions anywhere else” (Lazio/1, *Stadium Attendance*).

The third subcategory is the one called *Person-Related*, which is the one related to emotional investment linked to personal motivations toward the team. The differences in this subcategory are obvious: the answer units coded for Lazio are significantly higher than those for Roma (35 in 10 Lazio fans, 10 in 6 Roma fans). This discrepancy is evident in the section called *Obsession*, which is the feeling of true obsession that fans feel toward their team, but it is also evident in the other two sections, *Time* and *Expectations*. The most eye-popping result, however, is the fact that 10 out of 11 Lazio fans surveyed fall into this subcategory, denoting a strong personal aspect in what is Lazio fans’ investment in their team.

“However, being a fan is a bit sick. As when you are in love and sometimes you don’t realize that there it is an irrational part. Sometimes you ask yourself why I have to feel so bad?” (Lazio/10, *Obsession*).

Dividend refers to the “affective feelings derived from the team” (Dwyer *et al.* 2015, p. 575). In this category, however, coding of the interviews showed that Roma fans receive more feelings from their team than Lazio fans (29 Roma answer units versus 19 Lazio) (Tab. 5). As with emotional investment, response units have been coded into subcategories, but the subcategory *Person-Related* does not appear and we have added, only for Roma, the subcategory *City Identification*.

Tab. 5: Emotional Attachment - Dividend

Construct	Category	SS Lazio		AS Roma	
		Subcategories	n° answer units/fans	Subcategories	n° answer units/fans
Emotional Attachment	Dividend	1) <i>Game-Related</i>	9/6	1) <i>Game-Related</i>	13/8
		• In-Game	1/1	• In-Game	
		• Post-Game	8/6	• Post-Game	2/2
		2) <i>Group-Related</i>		2) <i>Group-Related</i>	11/8
		• Family	10/6	• Family	
		• Group Participation	7/4	• Group Participation	12/4
			3/2	3) <i>City-Identification</i>	4/2
			9/4		
			4/3		
		Subtotal of answer units	19	Subtotal of answer units	29

Source: author’ self-draft

Again, the first subcategory is *Game-Related* and to the team’s results. In line with what was seen in emotional investment, Roma fans report receiving more feelings from the team in the *In-Game* and *Post-Game* phases (13 answer units in 8 Roma fans, 9 answer units in 6 Lazio fans).

“I like sitting in front of the television and receiving feelings of tension, apprehension and joy which depend mainly on the result but sometimes also on the performance” (Roma/3, *Post-Game*).

The second subcategory is the one called *Group-Related*. In this subcategory in number of answer units differs little (10 answer units in 6 Lazio fans, 13 answer units in 4 Roma fans), but within it there are differences in sections. In particular, the dynamics related to the affective feelings received by Lazio fans turn out to be greater in terms of *Family*, i.e., the feelings in terms of a narrow sense of belonging, but less in terms of *Group Participation*.

“Taking into account that I have passed on the tradition of Lazio and the relating passion to my son, sharing this passion and my emotions with him is intertwined a bit with my son’s feelings” (Lazio/5, *Family*).

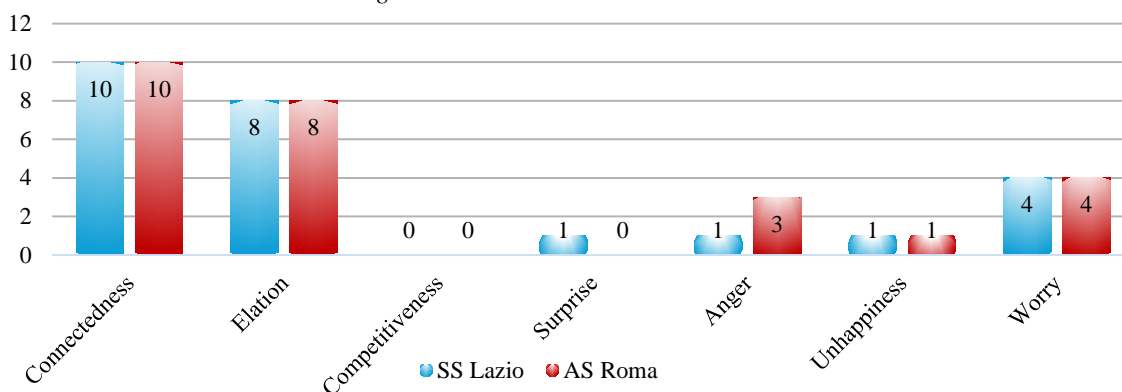
Finally, in the category of emotional dividend, coding has highlighted the subcategory of *City Identification*. As already seen for the Social Identity construct, this subcategory appears among Roma fans (4 answer units in 3 Roma fans). Such evidence further highlights the strong connection to the city that Roma conveys to its fans.

“Supporting Roma is like loving the city of Rome; for me the two things are profoundly related. [...] Whatever may happen I will always see in A.S. Roma the link with my city” (Roma/6, *City identification*).

From the results just presented, it is evident how there is a difference in what are the feelings that the two fans invest in their team (54 for Lazio fans and 33 for Roma fans). While Roma fans invest their emotions primarily around the match or a series of results, for Lazio fans they have a more personal emotional attachment to their team, to the point of obsession. Conversely, affective feelings derived from the team are higher among AS Roma fans (19 for Lazio fans and 29 for Roma fans). Underlying this result is greater involvement in *Game-Related* dynamics and the strong *City Identification* that the club conveys to its fans.

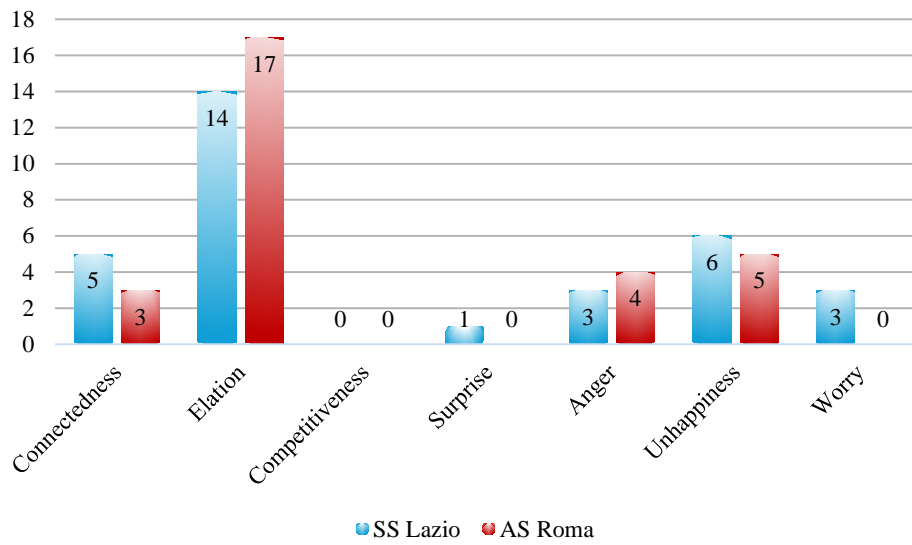
The analysis of the construct of emotional attachment, understood in its two categories of investment and dividend, offers an important insight into what emotions fans give and receive from their team. While a strong attachment to the city and match results shines through in Roma fans, Lazio fans show themselves to be more emotionally involved in personal dynamics with the team. To reinforce the expression of the fans’ emotional investment and dividend, they were asked to describe the two categories with up to three emotions each. The classification of emotions was used proposed by Lee *et al.* (Lee *et al.*, 2018). This model consisted of 7 factors, each containing 24 emotions: connection (passion, longing, support, and connection), elation (happy, excited, satisfied, proud, optimistic, and amused), competitiveness (competitive and aggressive), surprise (amazed, surprised, and astonished), anger (annoyed, frustrated, and angry), unhappiness (suffering, sad, regretful, and disconsolate) and worry (fearful and anxious) (Lee *et al.*, 2018). All the emotions described by the fans fell within the distinctive ones in the proposed model, and the results in terms of frequency can be seen in Figure 1 for Investment and Figure 2 for Dividend.

Fig. 1: Fans’ Emotions - Investment



Source: author’ self-draft

Fig. 2: Fans' Emotions - Dividend



Source: author' self-draft

3.2 Results on Subjective Well-Being and Discussion

For what concerns SWB, Lui and Fernando (2018) provided a multidimensional conceptualization (and psychometric instrument) of the construct. This research relies on this framework and thus analyses the social, physical, financial, hedonic, and eudaimonic dimensions of SWB (Lui and Fernando, 2018). These dimensions were used in our research as analysis categories for each of which the relevant subcategories were coded (Tab. 6).

Tab. 6: Subjective Well-Being

Construct	Categories	SS Lazio		AS Roma	
		Subcategories	n° answer units/fans	Subcategories	n° answer units/fans
Subjective Well-Being	Social	1) Family	6/3	1) Being part of something bigger	2/2
		2) Group Participation	2/2	2) Group Participation	5/3
	Physical	----	----		
	Financial	1) Expenditure Balance	2/2	1) Expenditure Balance	2/2
		2) Work-Life Balance	2/2	2) Work-Life Balance	6/5
	Hedonic	1) Sheltering	5/2	1) Sheltering	11/5
		2) Sport Results	6/4	2) Sport Results	6/6
		3) Venting	1/1		4/3
	Eudaimonic	1) Habit	6/4	1) Habit	3/3
	Subtotal of answer units			30	Subtotal of answer units
				39	

Source: author' self-draft

From the *Social* point of view, in line with the dynamics analysed above, we find differences between the two fans. Lazio fans declare social well-being mainly attributable to the subcategory *Family* (6 answer units in 3 fans) and minimally to the subcategory *Group Participation* (2 answer units in 2 fans). In contrast, Roma fans do not declare family well-being but, from a social point of view, find well-being from *Group Participation* (5 answer units in 3 fans) and *Being part of something bigger* (2 answer units in 2 fans).

In the category related to *Physical Well-being*, as was imaginable, reference answer units were coded, but these did not meet the inclusion threshold expected by the authors.

In the category related to *Financial well-being*, the two fans are very similar to each other on the level of *Expenditure Balance* (2 out of 2 answer units in both fans), but they differ regarding *Work-Life Balance* (2 out of 2 answer units in Lazio fans and 6 out of 5 in Roma fans). Roma fans, in fact, state that being a fan intervenes in some aspects of their work-life balance. This stems mainly from the weekly organization to follow the team in their sports commitments.

Hedonic Well-Being refers to the subjective evaluation of life circumstances and the balance between positive and negative emotions of each human being (Lui and Fernando, 2018). In this category, we identified three subcategories: *Sheltering*, *Sport Results*, and *Venting*. By *Sheltering* we mean the self-reported feeling of shelter and safety when cheering on their team. This aspect was coded into as many as 11 answer units in 5 different Roma fans compared to 5 answer units in 2 Lazio fans, indicating how for Roma fans this feeling plays a key role in their well-being as fans.

“Once we start singing the anthem everything disappears for me. Even if I get to the stadium after I’ve had a bad day or it happens that I got angry at work or I’m sad, suddenly everything is cancelled out. [...] Going to the stadium it’s as if I actually forget about my problems and I am able to enjoy the moment” (Roma/6, *Sheltering*)

More answer units were also coded in Roma fans (4 answer units versus only one in Lazio fans) in reference to *Venting* i.e., the feeling of venting that being a fan gives in terms of well-being.

“At that point I was able to unload everything I had inside when I was at the stadium, and I let off steam; it was a real relief valve” (Roma/4, *Venting*)

As for *Sport Results*-dependent well-being, for both fans there were 6 answer units. It is evident how Roma fans associate well-being as fans with moments of venting and moments when they feel protected.

Eudaimonic well-being refers to the subjective experiences associated with eudaimonia or living a life of virtue in pursuit of human excellence (Niemiec, 2014). In this section, the fact that for four Lazio fans (for 6 answer units) and three Roma fans (in 3 answer units) consider they’re being a fan a habit in their lives led us to include the *Habit* subcategory. Indeed, we believe that such activity that has become, precisely, habitual, gives value and meaning to the identity of the fans but also to their own lives.

“It has now become a habit for me, something I am used to doing and every two Sundays, or rather now, with the midweek shift even more so. A part of who I am that I would definitely miss if it wasn’t there” (Lazio/1, *Habit*).

In general, Roma fans most often link the level of well-being to their team (30 for Lazio fans and 39 for Roma fans). This is mainly realized in the *Hedonic* category. Here Roma fans report a greater sense of security and outlet in feeling like Roma fans, feelings also found in Lazio fans but to a lesser degree. The *Work-Life Balance* aspect also appears to be an important issue for Roma fans and less so for Lazio fans who instead see being a fan more as an established habit.

5. Implications, limitations, and future remarks

5.1 Theoretical Implications

The current research offers various elements of theoretical implications. To begin, contrary to existing literature concerning fanship and fandom which ad conceptualized fanship as a personal identification with team (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010; Reysen *et al.*, 2017, 2022), this study frames

and investigates both identifications as social identities; being fanship a mirroring construct of what has been broadly labelled as ‘team identification’ in sports consumer research (Wann, 2006; Reysen and Branscombe, 2010; Reysen *et al.*, 2022), this reconfiguration appears in line with the traditional SIA-based understanding of social identification with a team as developed in sports consumer research (Lock and Heere, 2017; Wann 2006). In addition, while previous studies on fanship and fandom have focused on structural equation modelling-based quantitative methodology, this study provides original in-depth qualitative understandings of these specific forms of sports consumers identifications, and the emotional values and significances attached to them (Tajfel & Turner, 1982). Thematic analysis followed a multidimensional conceptualization of group identity (Heere and James; Heere *et al.* 2011). Any significant subcategory (appearing in at least 5 interviews) was observed for interconnection of self; while previous studies this dimension has been considered under an affective understanding (Lock *et al.*, 2012), this research refers to a cognitive interpretation in line with existing research (Heere and James; Heere *et al.* 2011). Indeed, current results concerning the emotional attachment to the team denies the absence of the affective components in fans’ social identities (Tajfel and Turner, 1982). Findings relative to sense of interdependence with the group highlight - although in a minimal way - that fans as ingroup members tend to hold an idea of shared purpose and fate. This confirms the idea that sense of interdependence is not a vital element of group identity, yet it may be part of it (Lock *et al.*, 2012).

Furthermore, this research answers previous calls for exploring emotional attachment to the team in the identification processes of sports fans (Dwyer *et al.*, 2015). as evidenced by the number of answer units as well as the number of emerged subcategories, this study outlines the significant preponderance of football fans to refer more to the (cognitive) investment side of emotional attachment with respect to the emotional dividend. Dwyer and colleagues (2015) suggested that this situation portrays an irrational form of attachment to the team which may be associated with enhanced consumptive behaviours as well as perceptions of personal sacrifice. This consideration is here supported by the emergence of *Obsession* as a consistent thematic subcategory, particularly among Lazio fans. In line with these findings, Vallerand and colleagues (2003) found that sports fans tend to retain obsessive passions and engagement even when they receive negative personal returns and sensations.

Finally, results highlight the fulfilment of venting and sheltering needs through fanship- and fandom-induced behavioural engagement. While sheltering might be translated into a superordinated aspirational need to belong to a group (Tajfel and Turner 1982), venting has been recently outlined as a coping strategy to diminish the effect of disadvantages outcomes Kim and Kim (2023). These findings support and extend SIA research to health and wellbeing which posits that group membership offers various psychological resources to cope with stressful and negative conditions (Jetten *et al.*, 2017).

5.2 Managerial Implications

As emotions and identifications are recognized as key brand benefits associated with football brands (Bauer, 2005, 2008), exploring and understanding these elements is fundamental in football club brand images. Clubs, marketers, and managers should profit from a strategic approach to fans’ identification processes (symbolic benefit) and perceived emotions (experiential benefit), since positive emotions and strong identification are positively correlated with positive loyal behaviours toward the team (Bauer, 2005, 2008; Maderer *et al.*, 2016). The combination of interview-based data and frequency distribution of emotions concerned with personal cognitive investment and emotional dividend is here suggested as a research tool to provide in-depth knowledge relative to these key brand benefits.

Previous studies identified a strengthening effect of emotional attachment to the brand in the relationship between brand identification and customer loyalty (Hallberg *et al.*, 2003). In conditions of high cognitive investment with a club is expected to positively influence consistent behavioural

loyalty suggesting an irrational, sacrifice-like engagement to the team (Dwyer *et al.*, 2015; Ladhari *et al.*, 2015). Current findings extend existing knowledge concerning the cognitive-oriented investment and affective dividend of fans in the traditionally football-centric Italian sports industry. The overall predominance of cognitive investment dimension vis-à-vis the emotional dividend reflects mirrors the widespread behavioural (and financial) engagement with Italian fans and highlights (a) an implicit and widespread tendency to irrational engagement with the identified club (brand); and (b) a shared sensation of receiving back from the club less than the personal investment. Strategically targeting this sensation might positively develop clubs' shared image.

Clubs and managers are expected to aim at increasing perceived well-being of fans since service satisfaction was found to positively moderates (Matsuoka *et al.*, 2013) or even predict (Bodet and Bernache-Assollant, 2011) the relationship between brand identification and loyal attitudes of consumers. As highlighted in the findings, venting, and sheltering needs imply various opportunities managers and marketers can profit from. To stimulate emotional relief, both direct experiential (e.g. socialization and interactive areas around stadium area) and digital platforms (e.g. official social media pages) social connections might be promoted (Kim and Kim, 2023). Sharing emotional contents, reviving key moments, interfacing with fellow fans is expected not only expected to reduce negative emotions but also reinvigorate fanship and fandom (Kim and Kim, 2023; Reysen and Branscombe, 2010). Given the highly extended social visibility football clubs (particularly in Italy) benefit from, marketing and communication campaign might be focused on: (a) stimulating a sense of being 'sheltered', being protected by daily life problems, implicitly underlining a sense of belonging to the team and fans groups. (b) educating and promoting healthy ways to release emotional negativities after perceived disappointments. Monitoring social media platforms might be a functional way to capture the sentiment after key seasonal moments, events, or game-related negativities.

Finally, club specific emerging themes should be evaluated as threats and opportunities in the development of their brand images; for example, the presence of fans aligned with racist and neofascist fans within S.S. Lazio fanbase is perceived to obstacle fans' fandom and, consequently, the shared brand identity of the club. Targeting actual or potential problems in fanship and fandom perceptions is expected to ameliorate related brand identity. On the other hand, the strongly and widely perceived alignment between A.S. Roma club and the home city appears as a crucial asset enabling future marketing opportunities entailing multiple geographical group identities (e.g. city identification) (Heere and James, 2007).

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

The study has some limitations. The first concerns the sample since a low number of fans was reached in relation to the soccer fanbase in Italy. Future research should therefore verify the results obtained on a larger number of fans. A further limitation regarding the sample lies in the fact that the fans analysed share the same social, cultural, and especially urban context with the related commonalities and rivalries. Future research should analyse constructs among fans who do not share the same city and generate a comparison with other countries to see to what extent differences may exist on the issues of Social Identity, Emotional Attachment and Social Well-Being related to sports.

From a methodological point of view, one limitation lies in the manual coding and not through the automated software NVivo 14 because of the Italian language used in the interviews. In fact, the software does not provide automatic coding on Italian-language texts, so it was necessary to code answer units manually. The authors minimized possible discrepancies between the concepts of the constructs expressed in English and those expressed in Italian from the interviews.

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