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## **Creation of a brand model through SEM to predict users' loyalty and recommendations regarding a public sports service**

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### **Abstract**

Brand perception is a key element in achieving business success: how a brand is perceived by current and potential users determines what they think and their disposition towards the brand. The users' perception also determines whether they will perceive the sports service as offering a greater quality or value than other services, whether they will be more loyal, or whether they will recommend the service. This paper analyses the brand perception of users of a public sports service, creating a model of structural equations that analyses how credibility and trust influence a user's congruence with the brand and the generation of positive attitudes towards the brand and how these variables influence loyalty levels and recommendations. The results indicate that the proposed model can explain the variables of trust, congruence, attitudes, loyalty and word of mouth by more than 60%. The study finds that credibility influences trust but that credibility in itself does not cause a congruence with the brand, whereas trust does. Similarly, trust does not generate attitudes towards the brand but credibility and congruence do. Congruence generates loyalty but attitudes do not, and congruence, attitudes and loyalty influence recommendation to a similar extent, with congruence having the highest influence.

**Keywords:** Brand Perception, Marketing, Sports Services, Loyalty, Word-of-Mouth.

## **Introduction**

The study of consumer brand perception in sports services is an underdeveloped area of study, as established by Bougoure et al. (2016). Although the number of studies on services has been growing, the vast majority of the studies focus on the analysis of goods and not services, especially not sports services. Therefore, it is interesting to approach to study this area, since the sports industry is one of the most important industries for economies. We must take steps to better understand how consumers of sports services make decisions, given that the inherent characteristics of sports affect these services and make them somewhat different from other services. This study analyses the users' brand perception of a sports service and how this perception influences their behaviour as consumers, trying to obtain evidence that the proposed relationships are significant and that we can therefore predict the loyalty levels and recommendations that the users will exhibit in the future based on the consumers' brand perception of sports services.

If we examine the scientific literature, the study of brand image is a topic that has received the attention of academics and is increasingly gaining strength with a greater number of publications. However, when we try to access contrasted information on brand image in sports services, there is a great absence of information addressing the peculiarities of sports centres compared to other areas of service marketing. Therefore, it is interesting to analyse a context so relevant to the economy of countries such as the sporting one, identifying whether these tools, which have been tested in general marketing, perform in the same way in the sporting context or whether there are aspects that could modify the perceptions of certain variables of interest. Therefore, the relevance of this study is oriented to two aspects: on the one hand, to contributing to fill the above-mentioned gap in literature to this particular context, in order to provide more theoretical basis about this topic. On the other hand, this study aims to give tools to managers so that they can make decisions based on reliable information in their specific field. For this purpose, this study proposes the creation of a predictive model where from the variables related to brand perception, we can predict the levels of loyalty and recommendations of users of a public sports service. Through this structural equation modelling software, a model was performed, in order to test the proposed relationships and effects between the variables, the extent to which they are influential and the explanatory capacity of the model on the variables of interest. This methodology is interesting, since it allows us to explore the relationships between variables in this context to see if they operate in the same way as in other areas.

Next, we will show the theoretical framework in which the theories to which the study is related are discussed as well as the conceptualization of the different variables that form the model to be analysed. Subsequently, the method, the results obtained, as well as the discussion, conclusions and theoretical and practical implications of the contribution will be shown.

## **Theoretical Background**

The study examines the credibility variable and is therefore related to different theories on which this credibility variable is based. First, Sobel's theory of credibility (1985) establishes that, on many occasions, how we act depends on the trust that we have in the person (in this

case, the brand) with whom we interact. Therefore, the brand must, through actions and not words, try to generate that trust, so that the user does not feel uncertainty in the process. In the case of sports services, employees are a fundamental part of transmitting this trust to customers, serving as a means of communicating the brand's values. Second, Spence's signalling theory (1973) is relevant to this study. This theory starts from the idea that an agent (service brand) transmits information about its capacity to provide a service to another agent (consumer) and that to be credible, the information can provide credentials, which in the case of a sports service could be the support of a known brand (reputation), the celebrities or recognized brands associated with that service, or quality seals or awards that allow the service to have a greater status. The signalling theory explains that branding acts as a sign of the quality of the service, which is especially important in the context of sports services, due to the large amount of asymmetric information related to the quality of the service between, on the one hand, those who provide the service and, on the other hand, the consumers (Spence 1974). Hovland and Weiss's theory is also relevant (1951), which establishes that the persuasion achieved while carrying out a certain communication depends on the credibility of the source of the information, as perceived by the user; therefore, if the source does not manage to make the users perceive the source as credible, the message it sends will have no effect. In the case of sports services, as well as in other contexts, the brand must communicate credible information to users, not creating false expectations or promising things it cannot deliver, thus gaining credibility and making the communication it transmits more effective. Finally, the theory of social judgement of Hovland and Muzafer (1961) is relevant, in which the assimilation and contrast effect in communication and the change in attitudes are analysed. The users, in this case the users of a sports service, receive information on the brand and value this information in comparison with their reality. If the information received by the sport service and their reality are close, the assimilation of this information is facilitated, whereas if the relation is distant, then a contrasting effect will be produced. This contrast effect hinders assimilation, the perception of credibility and probably also the identification of the user with the brand.

### *Credibility*

When discussing brand credibility, it is logical to think that credibility is a very important element of a brand, since the fact that users see the brand as credible will make them perceive the brand more favourably and therefore the expectations regarding the company will be more positive (Goldsmith, Lafferty, and Newell, 2000). Credibility can be understood as the company's commitment and the promises it makes with the confidence that the company will carry out the commitment (Herbig and Milewcz, 1995), so that a brand is considered credible and reliable when it delivers on what it has promised (Morhart, Malär, Guèvremont, Girardin, and Grohmann, 2015). When a brand achieves high levels of credibility, consumers, in this case sports service users, can associate that brand with authenticity (Morhart et al., 2015) and other important aspects, which is why there are studies that try to understand the influence of credibility on other variables (Del Barrio-García y Prados-Peña, 2019). This concept of credibility is unique in that it has a cumulative character, that is to say, credibility is not based on a specific action that is carried out—rather, the credibility of a brand is the cumulative sum of all the actions carried out by the company (Erdem, Swait, and Louviere, 2002). Brands that

start from zero may be credible through planned action, but it is important to remain authentic over the years (Portal, Abratt, and Bendixen, 2018) and that authenticity is partly composed by the credibility that the brand transmits (Bruhn, Schoenmüller, Schäfer, and Heinrich, 2012; Morhart et al., 2015). Credibility allows a brand to position itself better on the market in which it coexists with other brands (Erdem and Swait, 2004) and, therefore, to have a preferential place in the minds of consumers and a greater probability that the user will choose the brand as a final option. This is very important in all contexts, including the context of sports services where there is so much competence. Therefore, brand credibility is an element that plays an important role in influencing other variables such as recommendations (Abu-Zavyad et al., 2020), attitudes (Chin, Isa, and Alodin, 2020), behavioural intentions (Jiménez-Barreto, Rubio, Campo and Molinillo, 2020) or trust by reducing perceived risk (Hanzaee and Taghipourian, 2012). So that it is necessary to study this aspect of a brand with the intention of understanding the mechanisms and thus being able to provide information to marketers on how to invest in credibility and improve the positive aspects of other variables (An, Do, Ngo, and Quan, 2018).

### *Brand Trust*

Based on the definition of the previous concept of credibility, the relationship between credibility and the concept of trust is intuitive. Trust has to do with the feeling of security that users have when interacting with a brand (Delgado-Ballester, Munuera-Alemán and Yagüe-Guillén, 2003). In addition, the concept is related to the users' feeling of confidence that if a problem arises, the brand will try to provide a solution (Kim, Shin, and Koo, 2018). In the area of product consumption, which includes the consumption of sports services, trust is an element that significantly influences the relationship established between the buyer and the seller (Kim and Walker, 2013), whereby trust makes the consumer-brand transaction-based orientation become a close, personal and lasting brand relationship (Tong, Su, and Xu, 2018). Trusted brands reduce the perceived risk and are purchased more frequently (Atulkar, 2020) so if we create trust in the purchase-sale process, the feeling of uncertainty in this relationship will be greatly reduced (Frasquet, Mollá, and Ruíz-Molina, 2017), because trust is a means of minimizing that uncertainty (Song, Wang, and Han, 2019); therefore, the greater the trust as perceived by users, the greater will be the certainty in predicting the intentions that the company will have (Pauwels-Delassus and Descotes, 2013). This concept of trust, in addition to the aforementioned benefits, has been associated with other elements that are important for the success of a sports services brand, such as satisfaction and loyalty (Choi and La, 2013) or perceived quality and satisfaction (Gummerus, Liljander, Pura and Van Riel, 2004). Therefore, the generation of brand trust must be a priority for marketers (Lude and Prügl, 2018) also in the sporting context, where its analysis is still underdeveloped.

### *Congruence*

Congruence is an aspect that has been accepted terminologically both in terms of consumer attraction to the brand and in terms of attachment and loyalty (Karampela, Tregear, Ansell, and Dunnett, 2018). Congruence is therefore the concept that explains why users choose to buy the brands that have an image that is more similar to their self-conception (Kwak and Kang, 2009); if in addition to buying a product that satisfies the needs that a user has at that

time, which is the main reason for buying the product, the product brand has an image consistent with that of the user, the satisfaction with the purchase will be greater (Bajac, Palacios, and Minton, 2018). Consumers in general, obviously including sports services clients, need a certain level of congruence between the purchase they make and the values or image that they have of themselves. This is explained by the cognitive theories that have marked studies over the years, such as Festinger's theory (1957), which tells us that when there is a lack of congruence, which in our case would be when a user buys a product whose image is different from the image of himself or herself, a dissonance is generated that makes the user feel bad and that must be solved. In a purchasing context, the solution could be not to buy that product and opt for another product or the user can convince himself or herself that the purchase is positive in some way. This congruence is also effective in the advertising actions carried out by a brand (Hirsh, Kang and Bodenhausen, 2012; Zdravkovic and Till, 2012), in sports sponsorships (Close, Krishen and LaTour, 2009) and in the image transfer process between the aspects inherent in sports events and the sponsors of the said event (Alonso-Dos-Santos, Vveinhardt, Calabuig, and Montoro-Ríos, 2016). Furthermore, in the sporting context, congruence has been shown to be important for improvement in aspects such as the effectiveness of sports sponsorships (Alonso Dos-Santos et al., 2019; Alonso Dos-Santos and Calabuig, 2018); similarly, congruence is important for improving the perception of performance in sports services, proving to be a suitable starting point for improvement of user's loyalty through credibility, the trust generated by the credibility and attitudes towards the brand (Alguacil, Sánchez-García, and Valantine, 2019).

#### *Brand Attitudes*

The concept of attitudes can be understood as a relatively long-lasting summary of the impressions produced by a brand that can stimulate buying behaviour (Spear and Singh, 2004). More recent definitions add that brand attitudes correspond to a consumer's assessment of the cumulative brand associations and beliefs, which influences brand trust and reputation (Foroudi, 2019). When consumers receive information from a particular brand, they begin to process the information and generate certain attitudes towards the brand, whether positive or negative. Alexandris, Douka, Papadopoulos and Kaltsatou (2008) argue that the attitudes formed in this process can be classified into three components: cognitive (information processing), affective (emotions) and conative (predisposition towards a certain behaviour). The channel through which brands can transmit information to users trying to associate the brand with certain aspects will be advertising, since through advertising, consumers are able to associate the product they see with the symbolic representations emanating from the product (Saavedra, Urdaneta, Pirela, and Colmenares, 2008). In sports services, which in the past had a lack of presence in some communication channels, this is changing increasingly, being nowadays present in almost all platforms and communication channels to reach their target audiences in a more effective way. Along these lines, attitudes generated towards the brand will be the precursor of the behaviours that will be engaged in by users (Woisetschläger, Backhaus, and Cornwell, 2017). If a brand is capable of transmitting this type of an association through advertising actions or the brand's own actions, the brand will make the purchase process and the decisions related to the choice of the brand simpler (Romaniuk and Gaillard, 2007), since the brand can generate positive feelings towards itself

(Low and Lamb, 2000) as well as create a better perception of the quality of the product and more positive attitudes towards the brand (Keller, 2003). This generation of emotions and feelings is easier to occur in the sports context than in other areas, due to its inherent peculiarities, such as the social contact and closeness with employees, so as managers, we must exploit these advantages.

### *Loyalty*

The concept of loyalty has been addressed extensively in the literature, precisely because of the great importance of this concept. Since loyalty is the aspect that allows users, in this case a sports service, to continue attending the service, loyalty therefore makes possible the retention of the current users of the service (Wu, 2011), which ensures the viability and sustainability of the service. This loyalty has been defined in different ways: some points of view understand loyalty as the simple repetition of the purchase process (Andreassen and Lindestad, 1998) and other points of view go beyond and attend to the cognitive aspects implied by this loyalty, as in the case of Bandyopadhyay and Martell (2007), who speak about the user's attitudinal commitment when purchasing a brand, which exemplifies what would be an inertial purchase and a purchase with a predisposition towards the brand. If we want to analyse how user loyalty is achieved, we must understand that there will always be a part of the decision that is based on the criterion of the user who makes the purchase but that the evidence on the brand and the positive or negative rumours about the brand will also influence the user's decision (Krystallis and Chrysochou, 2014). In the specific case of the sporting context, in which there are many health clubs and gyms that are characterized by a high dropout rate, the improvement of loyalty requires personalized actions to increase retention (Pinheiro and Cavique, 2019). In this sense, Alguacil et al. (2019) study the influence of the brand image on improving users' loyalty to sports services, identifying that congruence, as a starting point for establishing relationships with variables such as credibility, trust and attitudes, is the antecedent of the greater loyalty of users to sports centres.

### *Word-of-Mouth*

Word-of-mouth is a concept that refers to the recommendation that a user makes for a certain product, and as Westbrook (1987) defines it, the concept concerns an informal communication that is carried out in the evaluation of goods or services. Other authors understand the concept more as a self-report on user behaviour (Bowman and Narayandas, 2001) that arises from a previous experience with a particular brand that may have been satisfactory or unsatisfactory (Bitner, 1990) and that will obviously influence whether the recommendation is made in a positive or negative sense. If the recommendation received by the user is positive, he or she will feel more confident about the brand and about buying the product (Kim, Ferrin and Rao, 2008) and he or she will develop positive expectations regarding the product quality (See-To and Ho, 2014). In the literature, recommendations have been considered an influential element in consumer behaviour (Jamali and Khan, 2018; Reza-Jalilvand and Samiei, 2012; Wu and Wang, 2011), and the case of sports services, of course, is also an environment that is conducive to this type of communication between consumers (Harrison-Walker, 2001).

The concept of word-of-mouth is closely related to other elements in the user perception of a brand. For example, it is known that when a consumer is satisfied with a brand because he or she finds it credible, the recommendation is favourable (Sweeney and Swait, 2008); similarly, it has been verified that when a user is satisfied, the level of loyalty towards the product increase and this loyalty favours the production of a product recommendation (Wang, Hernandez and Minor, 2010). On the other hand, in relation to brand image, it has been demonstrated that perceived quality significantly influences credibility and that this credibility influences attitudes towards the brand, which contributes to increasing the loyalty levels and consequently WOM (Alguacil et al., 2018).

## Method

### *Sample*

The sample comprises users of a public sports service in the city of Valencia (Spain), with a sample of 265 users. The data were collected in February 2020, just before the pandemic that has led to the closure of sports centres on several occasions and has considerably reduced the number of members of these centres. This service is a municipal centre where different activities are carried out, mainly fitness activities, but also team sports trainings and swimming pool activities. Regarding the characteristics of this sample, 26.79% are men (n=71) and 73.21% are women (n=194). Ranges were stipulated for the variables of age and frequency of attendance. Regarding age, 60.38% (n=160) are users aged 18 to 30, 17.36% (n=46) are aged 36 to 45 and 22.26% (n=59) are aged 46. Regarding the frequency of attendance, we differentiate between occasional (1 time or less per week), regular (2 or 3 times per week) and frequent (more than 3 times per week). Of the total number of respondents, 7 users are occasional (2.64%), 135 are regular (50.94%) and 123 are frequent (46.42%) attendees. Finally, in relation to the employment situation of the users surveyed, 120 users work full time (45.28%), 44 work part time (16.60%), 81 are unemployed and/or students (30.57%) and 20 are retired (7.55%). This study respected the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki (WMA, 2013), with particular emphasis on the anonymization of the data collected, confidentiality, and non-discrimination of participants.

### *Instrument*

The instrument used was a survey consisting of different scales aimed at measuring the different variables that are included in the study. The credibility dimension was obtained from Sweeney and Swait (2008), the trust dimension from Hur, Kim, and Kim (2014), the congruence dimension from Grace and O'Cass (2005), the attitudes from Gwinner and Bennet (2008) and Besharat (2010), the loyalty from Yoo and Donthu (2001), Lee and Leh (2011) and Tong and Hawley (2009) and finally, the recommendation dimension was obtained from Hightower, Brady, and Baker (2002). Below, in Table 1, we can see the detail of the items used. These scales were validated for the context of sports services by Alguacil (2017), confirming their reliability and validity.

Table 1. Instrument

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Item</b>
Credibility	This service delivers what is promises

	The claims about its service are believable This brand has a name you can trust
Trust	I trust this brand X is an honest brand I rely this brand
Congruence	The image of this service is consistent with my own self-image Using this service reflects who I am People similar to me use this service The kind of person who typically uses this service is very much like me
Attitudes	I like X brand X is a very good brand I have favourable disposition toward X
Loyalty	I consider myself to be loyal to this service This service would be my first choice I will not attend to other services as long as I can access this one
WOM	I say positive things about going to this service to other people I recommend going to this service to someone who seeks my advice I encourage friends and relatives to go to this service

### *Statistical analysis*

The structural equations software EQS 6.3 was used to obtain the data of the model that includes the different variables, creating the structural model in which the different relationships to be tested were established. The analysis was then carried out to ascertain, on the one hand, whether the hypotheses that were put forward are significant and to what extent they are significant and, on the other hand, to ascertain the predictive capacity of the variables of interest that were included in the model.

## **Results**

### *Structural Model*

First, the structural model was developed with a total of 11 hypotheses (see figure 1) that propose different predictive relationships between the variables.

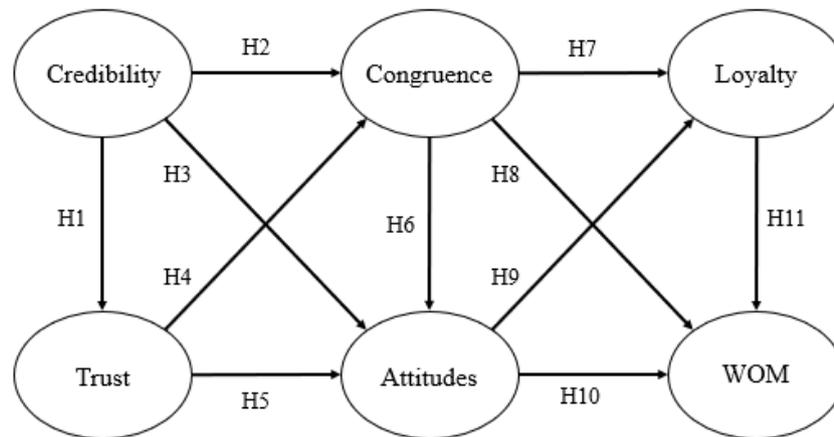
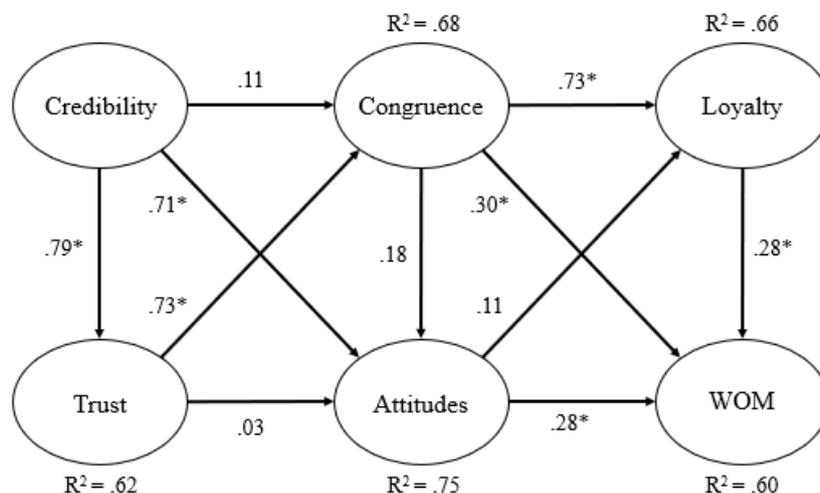


Figure 1. Structural model

Once the structural model is created, we examine the results obtained regarding each of the proposed relationships (see figure 2). As seen, brand credibility (F1) significantly predicts trust (F2). Credibility (F1) does not significantly predict congruence (F3) but it predicts attitudes (F4), while trust (F2) predicts congruence (F3) but not attitudes (F4) and congruence (F3) predicts these attitudes (F4). Congruence (F3) predicts loyalty (F5) and WOM (F6), while attitudes (F4) do not directly predict loyalty (F5), but they do predict WOM (F6). Finally, we find that loyalty (F5) significantly predicts WOM (F6). Once the confirmatory factor analysis was carried out, the data indicate a good fit of the model ( $\chi^2/df = 2.73$ , RMSEA = .07, NFI = .93, NNFI = .94, CFI = .95, IFI = .95) also for robust adjustment ( $\chi^2/df = 2.02$ , RMSEA = .06, NFI = .92, NNFI = .95, CFI = .96, IFI = .96). In addition, in terms of reliability, a Cronbach alpha of .97 and a rho reliability coefficient of .98 were obtained.

As for the explanatory capacity of the model variables, the results indicate that trust is explained up to 62% by credibility, congruence is explained up to 68% by trust, while attitudes are explained up to 75% by credibility and congruence, with credibility being the most important factor in this prediction. Finally, we find that loyalty is explained up to 66% by congruence, while the recommendation or word-of-mouth is explained up to 60% by the influence of congruence, attitudes towards the brand and loyalty, with congruence having the most predictive weight, but close to the other two variables.



## Figure 2. Results of the structural model

Below (see table 2) is a summary of the results of the hypotheses put forward.

Table 2. Summary of hypotheses

Hypotheses	$\beta$	T value	Result
H1. Credibility→Trust	.79	15.69*	Supported
H2. Credibility→Congruence	.11	1.63	Not Supported
H3. Credibility→Attitudes	.71	9.66*	Supported
H4. Trust→Congruence	.73	10.15*	Supported
H5. Trust→Attitudes	.03	.34	Not Supported
H6. Congruence→Attitudes	.18	2.57*	Supported
H7. Congruence→Loyalty	.73	10.43*	Supported
H8. Congruence→WOM	.30	3.58*	Supported
H9. Attitudes→Loyalty	.11	1.92	Not Supported
H10. Attitudes→WOM	.28	4.84*	Supported
H11. Loyalty→WOM	.28	3.70*	Supported

\*T> 1.96 (Veasna, Wu y Huang, 2000).

## Discussion

As commented on at the beginning of this paper, the study of brand perception in the field of sports services is not very common, so it is difficult to find examples of studies that have carried out similar research. However, there is a large number of studies that have analysed these brand relationships in other service fields that are similar in a certain way (Chen, Zhou, Zhan, and Zhou, 2020; Jiménez-Barreto, Rubio, Campo, and Molinillo, 2020), also in the sporting context (Bodet, Geng, Chanavat, and Wang, 2020; Calabuig, Prado-Gascó, Núñez-Pomar, and Crespo-Hervás, 2021) as well as analysing specifically sports brand and its relationship with consumer behaviour (Kunkel and Biscaia, 2020). This examples to prove the importance of brand-related variables to explain consumer behavior and determine how certain variables are related and to what extent they do so to explain these decisions. The newness in the present study is that we analyse the specific context of public sports services to determine whether these relationships occur in the same way or undergo variations, to better understand users' behavior in this sector. In the first hypothesis proposed, credibility is related to trust, as related in other studies (Hussain, Melewar, Priporas, Foroudi, and Dennis, 2020). These are variables that have a close relationship, since when a user perceives the information coming from a communicator, such as a brand, as credible, he or she perceives the brand as less risky and therefore it is easier for the user to have trust in the brand; similarly, if the brand does not seem credible to the user, then perceived risk will be greater (Erdem et al., 2002). There are studies that state that the concept of credibility is an aspect that is a part of a broader whole that is the authenticity of the brand (Bruhn et al., 2012; Morhart et al., 2015), an aspect that is clearly influential in the relationship with the trust in the brand (Portal et al., 2018). Moreover, recent literature also shows the mediating effect of brand trust on the

relationship between credibility and congruence (Alguacil, González-Serrano, Gómez-Tafalla, González-García, and Aguado-Berenguer 2021). This is very relevant for the present study, since it explains the fact that the direct relationship between credibility and congruence (which made sense theoretically) was not significant in the model, while it is from trust to congruence, probably due to that mediation of brand trust confirmed by the authors.

Subsequently, according to the relationships shown in the model, if a user perceives a brand as credible and also has a perception of security when interacting with the brand, which is how brand trust is defined by Delgado-Ballester et al. (2003), the user will have a better predisposition, which is related to the attitudes towards the brand. In the study by Yoo and McInnis (2005), the authors explain how when consumers receive credible information from a brand, the attitudes generated towards the brand are more positive. Along the same lines, Wu and Wang (2011) establish that when a brand recommendation comes from a source that a user perceives as credible, the attitudes towards the brand will also be more positive. This is in line with the results of the present study, where the relationship between credibility and attitudes has been confirmed. Regarding the proposed relationship between congruence variables and attitudes, the literature has analysed the role of congruence as an antecedent or a mediating factor for achieving different results in behaviour (Lam, Ahearne, Hu, and Schillewaert, 2010; Morhart, Herzog, and Tomczak 2009). In this sense, Press and Arnould (2011) establish that the work must continue to understand the mechanisms that facilitate identification among brand community members. Studies such as that of Ko and Kim (2014) analyse what attitudes are and the extent to which they influence consumer behaviour, concluding that when there is congruence between the brand and the consumer, such congruence has a moderating effect on the consumers' attitudes. Gwinner and Bennet (2008) also support this idea and establish that the congruence that exists between the consumer and the brand makes attitudes more positive. Finally, there is the research of Ogonowski, Montandon, Botha and Reyneke (2014), in which they suggest that congruence generates better attitudes towards the brand, which favours an attachment to the brand; it is also understood that brand trust facilitates the generation of positive attitudes towards the brand, which is in accordance with the hypotheses put forward. Despite this evidence, in the present study, congruence has not shown a significant effect on attitudes, and neither trust on attitudes, which leads us to think possible explanations, such as mediating effects that may be acting or peculiarities of the context analysed. Accordingly, it is well known that brand identification can be developed over time through certain actions carried out by the brand; therefore, we must understand which strategies develop congruence to subsequently improve the identification more effectively (He, Chen, Lee, Wang, and Pohlmann, 2017) so that the attitudes subsequently generated follow the line desired by the brand.

As for the proposed relations that involve the variables of congruence, loyalty and recommendation, there are articles that are the references on the subject, such as that of Misra and Beatty (1990), which verifies that congruence between the consumer and the brand leads to the consumers having a better memory of the brand in their mind, so that the probability of a repurchase increases. In this sense, improved congruence will influence the levels of brand loyalty (Kressmann et al., 2006). Regarding with the relationship between congruence and loyalty, Kim, Han, and Park (2001) establish that the identification, closely related to

congruence, increases recommendations but it does not directly increase loyalty. This contrasts with the results obtained in this study, where congruence is shown to influence both loyalty and recommendations. In the field of sports, we find examples such as the study by Zhang and Bloemer (2008), where it is proven that congruence significantly influences variables such as satisfaction, affective commitment and loyalty. Attitudes have proven to be influential on recommendations but not directly on loyalty, and this contrasts with some of the studies (Gwinner and Bennet, 2008; Kim, Morris, and Swait, 2008; Seo, Green, Ko, Lee, and Schenewark, 2007, Suh and Youjae, 2006) in which it is suggested that the higher the level of positive attitudes towards the brand, the greater is the increase in the variable of loyalty. In addition, this contrasts with studies where it is shown that attitudes play a mediating role in explaining the loyalty towards a brand (Sivarajah, 2014) or that they are a precedent that is created with advertising and through the corporate image, which have an influence on loyalty (Suh and Youjae, 2006). On the other hand, we find contributions such as that of Seo et al. (2007), in which it is established that attitudes towards a product, in this specific case a website, are significantly related to consumers' future intentions.

Continuing with the above, loyalty is a variable that has been widely studied in research, which has related loyalty to variables such as those proposed in the model: for example, the study by Sweeney and Swait (2008), in which the relationship between credibility, loyalty and recommendation is analysed; the contribution of Nam, Ekinci, and Whyatt (2011), which studies the relationship between loyalty and congruence, or the classic study of Chaudhuri (1999), in which the relationship between attitudes and user loyalty is analysed. Finally, the last variable that forms a part of the model is the recommendation or the word-of-mouth. Regarding this variable, we find studies that analyse the recommendation as being related to a greater consideration and dedication of time to valuing a product (Gupta and Harris, 2010), with the understanding that the recommendation has two main antecedents, satisfaction and loyalty (Baek et al., 2010), which have a significant influence on the recommendation, a relationship confirmed in the present study.

## **Conclusions**

As far as the conclusions of this work are concerned, we can say that the model proposed, combining the variables of brand perception and the future intentions of the users of the sports service, is adequate for explaining the different variables proposed, having obtained an explanatory capacity of over 60% for each of the variables of interest. The conclusions of this research suggest that the brand must transmit credibility to generate trust and that trust will contribute significantly to user's congruence with the brand. This congruence, together with the credibility that a brand transmits, will be useful for improving the attitudes of the users towards the brand. In addition, the congruence will be significant predictor of the loyalty that the user will have to using the service. Finally, the study concludes that for the service to be recommended, the attitudes towards the brand, the congruence with it, and the loyalty towards the brand are influential, having the congruence the highest predictive weight.

## **Implications, Limitations and Future Lines of Research**

This type of research represents an interesting contribution not only to the scientific field but also to the professional reality of sports managers. At the academic level, as stated by Kunkel

and Biscaia (2020), the number of articles related to the brand analysis in the field of sports and its relationship with consumer behaviour, have grown significantly in recent years, finding a greater presence of this topic in impact journals. Furthermore, countries such as Spain (where this study was carried out) were not even represented. Therefore, in addition to contributing to this topic and helping to increase the theoretical base on brand analysis in sports services, which to date continues to be practically non-existent, we contribute to providing information on the Spanish context. From the point of view of sport managers, this information provides concrete data from the sports context, in order to better understand how the brand relates to consumer behavior. Understanding how their brand is perceived implies knowing the strong and weak points and whether the perception that the customers have of the brand is in line with the marketing strategy that is proposed. In addition, sports managers can determine how the variables relate to each other and which variables influence the achievement of the objectives that they pursue, so they can have guidelines on where it is more effective to invest their efforts to achieve the objectives that they set. In terms of limitations, the fact of having a sample of a very localized fitness centre prevents generalization, so in future research it would be interesting to collect information from different fitness centres in the country, even from different countries. On the other hand, it would also be interesting, in this comparison, to differentiate by price ranges, to see if the analyses change according to their positioning.

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