**Building brands 'softly': A study on the effect of country image, affinity, and fan engagement on soft power in sport.**

## Abstract

This study examines the effect of country image and affinity on soft power among sport fans, as well as the mediating role of affinity and moderating role of online fan engagement. Data from 431 respondents were collected using a survey conducted via an online panel. The findings show that the constructs of country image, affinity and online fan engagement influence soft power. The findings contribute to extending the study of soft power in sports especially in understanding the indirect effects of affinity and online fan engagement. From a managerial perspective, this study will provide insights to nations and companies that seek to build or enhance their soft power through sport.

**Keywords**: Soft power, Fan behavior, Country image, Affinity, Online engagement, Sport fans

## Introduction

"Power is the ability to influence the behavior of others to get the outcomes one wants."

~ Joseph S. Nye

Ask anyone to define power in relation to a country and one might get a host of answers from the strength of a country's destructive capabilities of its nuclear weapons (Mead, 2015) to the ability of a country to dominate the world from a political perspective, where world politics is shaped to be in line with the interests of the country (Beckley, 2018). These definitions are deemed as hard power. On the other hand, one might easily overlook the concept of soft power which has played a significant role in shaping public perception and preferences of countries. Soft power depends on the ability of a country to use intangible assets such as culture and values to attract and persuade others (Nye, 2017). The world has witnessed soft power effectively shape and create positive country perception through characters such as Hello Kitty and Pokémon and music such as BTS. Along a similar vein, soft power in the world of sport is something not new as nations and companies work on creating a positive image through sponsorship, club ownership and hosting sport events. Some nations and companies seek to create a favorable image through soft power in order to positively change the narrative or negative perception that is held by the fans and public at large toward them, for example Qatar and the controversies surrounding human rights.

This study examines the relationships between country image, soft power and affinity as well as online fan engagement to understand how they interact in impacting soft power. It aims to contribute to the body of literature regarding soft power in sports marketing, as nations and companies seek to improve or build a more positive brand.

**Conceptual Model**
A conceptual model 1 is developed to test the relationships, both direct and indirect effects of the respective constructs with the following hypotheses, as shown in Fig. 1.

Direct effect:
H1: Country image positively affects affinity
H2: Country image positively affects soft power
H3: Affinity positively affects soft power

Indirect effect:
H4: Affinity mediates the relationship between country image and soft power
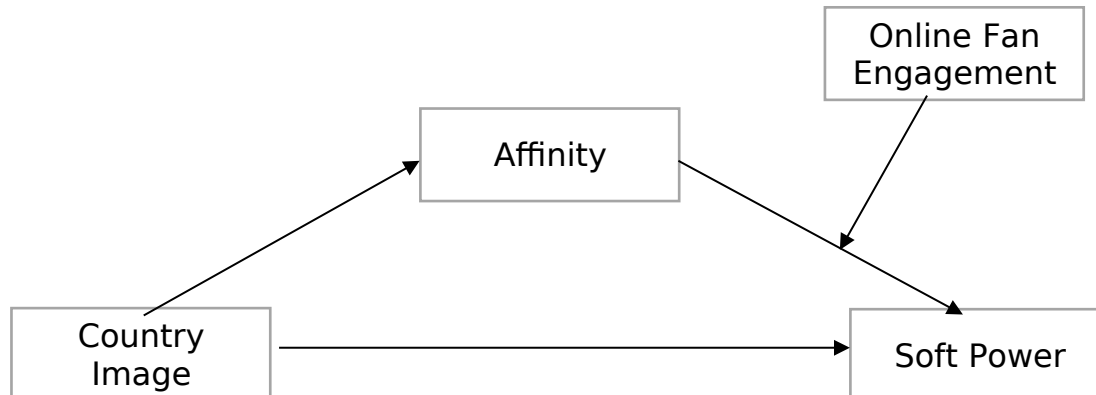H5: Fan engagement moderates the relationship between affinity and soft power

*Fig. 1 Conceptual model*

**Method**
*Sampling*
A total of 431 respondents were recruited via a Japanese online panel using non-probability sampling (Mean age: 45.67; SD = 13.57; Female: 31.32%; Male: 68.68%). Prospective respondents were given the option to participate in the survey after reading a brief explaining the nature of the study in an email that was sent to them by the online panel company.

*Measurements*
The measures used in this study were taken from existing literature. To measure country image, an eight-item scale was adapted from Pappu et al. (2007) while affinity was measured with a five-item scale modified from Neto et al. (2020). Fan engagement measured using a four-item scale adapted from Lee et al. (2011). Finally, a fourteen-item scale adapted from McClory (2012), Nes et al. (2014) and Nye (2004, 2011) was used to measure soft power. All items were measured using a six-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree) to respondents selecting the middle option (Lee et al., 2002).

**Results**
First, items that demonstrated cross-loading as well as factor loadings lower than 0.6 were removed after running an exploratory factor analysis. To check model fit, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using SPSS Amos 28 was used. The results of the demonstrated a good model fit, $\chi2/df$ = 2.565, GFI = 0.919, TLI = 0.956, CFI = 0.969, RMSEA = 0.06, SRMR = 0.0394, which were within the respective cut off values (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2011). High reliability was demonstrated by all constructs with Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha$) values ranging from 0.814 to 0.936. Convergence validity was established as composite reliability (CR) values ranged from 0.828 to 0.967, while the average variance extracted (AVE) values were 0.712 to 0.891. Discriminant validity was also exhibited through HTMT.

The structural model was tested using a bootstrap procedure at 10,000 samples. The results reflected a moderate fit with the following statistics fit: $\chi2/df$ = 2.79, GFI = 0.932, TLI = 0.957, CFI = 0.973, RMSEA = 0.065, SRMR = 0.0366. In terms of direct effects, country image showed a positive effect on affinity (beta=0.325, $p < 0.001$), supporting H1. The results demonstrated that there is a positive effect of country image on soft power (beta=0.440, $p < 0.001$), supporting H2. Finally, affinity exerted a significant positive effect on soft power (beta = 0.48, $p < 0.001$) confirming H3.

To test the indirect effect, Hayes SPSS Process macro v4 was used at Bootstrap procedure at 10,000 samples with bias-corrected 95% confidence levels. First, the mediating effect of affinity was tested using model 4. The results demonstrated that affinity partially mediates the relationship between country image and softpower (Indirect = 0.119, SE = 0.031, 95% CI [0.065, 0.186]), supporting H4. Moderated mediation analysis was also conducted, and the results also showed a significant moderated mediation relationship, where fan engagement affects affinity which in turn influenced soft power where higher the fan engagement, the indirect effect decreases (indirect = - 0.038, SE = 0.018, 95% CI [-0.075, - 0.004], hence supporting H5.

**Discussion**

The study demonstrates the relationships between country image and affinity as constructs in affecting soft power, as well as the moderating role of fan engagement. For companies and countries to increase soft power, they need to be aware of the importance of country image which also can be shaped by the narrative that the media puts out. Affinity is also a vital construct where fans who have positive country image would impact the affinity that they experience that leads to the perception of the country possessing soft power. The findings can be utilized by companies and countries that are aiming to increase their soft power through sport where they need to focus on ensuring a positive country image in both micro and macro aspects while at the same time, develop emotional attachment with sport fans to increase affinity. However, as online fan engagement weakens the indirect effect, a future study can be undertaken to examine the reasons.

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