

## **The Power of Nostalgia: Celebrities' Brand Love and Its Effects on Consumer Behavior**

### **Authors**

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### **Abstract**

This study examines the interplay between attachment to retired athlete celebrity Valentino Rossi and sports nostalgia, investigating their impact on consumer behaviour. Using the brand love framework, we explore how two types of sports nostalgia - celebrity-based and socialisation-based - affect loyalty to the Valentino Rossi brand (VR46) and intentions to attend future live sports events. Data (n = 230) was collected through an intercept survey during the "Gran Premio motociclistico di San Marino e della Riviera di Rimini 2022" event in September 2022. Results highlight the following key insights: Brand Love for Valentino Rossi significantly influences behavioural loyalty and triggers both forms of nostalgia. However, its impact on future intentions is not significant. Surprisingly, celebrity-based nostalgia exhibits an unexpected negative direct effect on loyalty. Conversely, socialisation-based nostalgia positively enhances future intentions.

**Key Words: Brand Love, Nostalgia, Human Brand, Sports Celebrities, Brand Management**

### **Introduction**

Persons, such as products, may be envisioned as marketable entities: athletes, singers, actors, politicians, or even businesspeople may all be the centre of marketing actions and, thus, the object of study of the branding discipline (Osorio et al., 2020; Thomson, 2006). Celebs, as brands, have specific features and are associated with something in consumers' (or followers') minds. They have their symbolic meaning and value, communicated using their name, face or other brand elements in the market (Arai et al., 2014). Literature shows that consumers view celebrity athletes as human brands with unique personalities and are likelier to connect with them if they express a differentiated personality (Carlson & Donavan, 2013). People often idolise top athletes more than famous scientists, politicians, and artists.

Developing and cultivating an athlete's brand involves enhancing the distinctive connection between the athlete and their fans (Parmentier & Fischer, 2012). Furthermore, unlike other human brands, these individuals are important for both on-field and off-field performances:

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they can win matches and loyalise people, increasing tickets and merchandising sales, for instance (Dix et al., 2010; Yu, 2005). Recognising this, research on athlete brands has surged in recent years (Cortsen, 2013; Costa & Hallmann, 2022; Lobpries et al., 2018).

More specifically, there is a need to empirically explore how retired athletes, who have left a significant impact, are perceived by sports enthusiasts. This is crucial, as their enduring sentimental and nostalgic connections play a pivotal role in shaping the overall image of these athletes as brands. To understand how these legendary retired athletes may use their heritage, it is imperative to delve deeply into the brand associations that form the essence of retired athletes' image. Building upon this foundation, this study focuses on exploring the relationship between the connection to a retired athlete celebrity - essentially a human brand - and sports nostalgia, with a keen focus on their impact on the behaviour of sports enthusiasts. In detail, Valentino Rossi, a former MotoGP champion, serves as an exemplary instance of a human brand within this investigation. By employing the brand love framework to gauge consumers' attachment to the human brand, this research examines the influence of distinct variants of sports nostalgia - celebrity-based and socialisation-based - on both loyalty towards the Valentino Rossi brand (i.e., VR46) and individuals' intentions to participate in forthcoming live sports events.

## **Theoretical Background**

Brand love may be defined as "the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name" (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006, p. 81). Countless investigations on the effects of brand love on consumer behaviours are present, especially loyalty. To name a few, Bagozzi et al. (2017), Langner et al. (2016), and Sarkar (2011) conceptualised and analysed the relationship between brand love and several consumer outcomes in different types of products offering evidence that brand love is strongly linked with these. Another consequence is consumers' willingness to close the distance – reduce the gap – between them and their objects of love. This is particularly salient in the case of sports. In parallel, nostalgia is viewed as a yearning for a fond memory of personal experiences and possessions of days gone by (Holbrook, 1993). Merchant et al. (2013) defined nostalgia as a contemplative look at the past made up of memories and diverse emotions. More specifically, the present study considers two distinct forms of sports nostalgia, drawing upon insights from the several investigations conducted by Cho and colleagues (Cho et al., 2017, 2019, 2020, 2021). The first type is celebrity-based nostalgia, akin to Cho et al.'s (2017) concept of sports teams nostalgia. This variant relates nostalgia to the persona of Valentino Rossi. The second form is characterised as socialisation-based nostalgia, intricately tied to recalling significant moments associated with an individual's involvement in a collective linked to a sporting event. Sporting events intricately weave a tapestry of communal rituals and shared experiences, cultivating a profound sense of camaraderie among participants. The remembrance of such collective encounters has the potential to evoke sentiments of nostalgia (Cho et al., 2017). Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H1:** Brand love for Valentino Rossi has a significant and positive direct effect on consumers' behavioural loyalty.
- H2:** Brand love for Valentino Rossi has a significant and positive direct effect on

consumers' future intentions to attend live sports events.

**H3:** Brand love for Valentino Rossi has a positive direct effect on celebrity-based nostalgia.

**H4:** Brand love for Valentino Rossi has a positive direct effect on Socialisation-based nostalgia.

The attachment developed through nostalgia causes consumers to be more inclined to strengthen their association with a brand. Studies have consistently associated nostalgia with a spectrum of positive outcomes, encompassing loyalty, purchase intention, positive word-of-mouth, and beyond (for a review, Srivastava et al., 2023). Furthermore, in the sports domain, sports nostalgia has been reported as a significant predictor of individuals' intention to travel to the home grounds of their teams and to partake in future games and athletic events (Cho et al., 2019, 2021). Considering its context, the present study suggests the potential mediating role of sports nostalgia in the connection between brand love and the examined consumer outcomes. Thus, the following hypotheses are suggested:

**H5:** Celebrity-based nostalgia has a positive direct effect on consumers' behavioural loyalty.

**H5a:** Celebrity-based nostalgia has a positive mediating effect on the relationship between brand love for Valentino Rossi and consumers' behavioural loyalty.

**H6:** Celebrity-based nostalgia has a positive direct effect on consumers' future intentions to attend live sports events.

**H6a:** Celebrity-based nostalgia has a positive mediating effect on the relationship between brand love for Valentino Rossi and consumers' future intentions to attend live sports events.

**H7:** Socialisation-based nostalgia has a positive direct effect on consumers' behavioural loyalty.

**H7a:** Socialisation-based nostalgia has a positive mediating effect on the relationship between brand love for Valentino Rossi and consumers' behavioural loyalty.

**H8:** Socialisation-based nostalgia has a positive direct effect on consumers' future intentions to attend live sports events.

**H8a:** Socialisation-based nostalgia has a positive mediating effect on the relationship between brand love for Valentino Rossi and consumers' future intentions to attend live sports events.

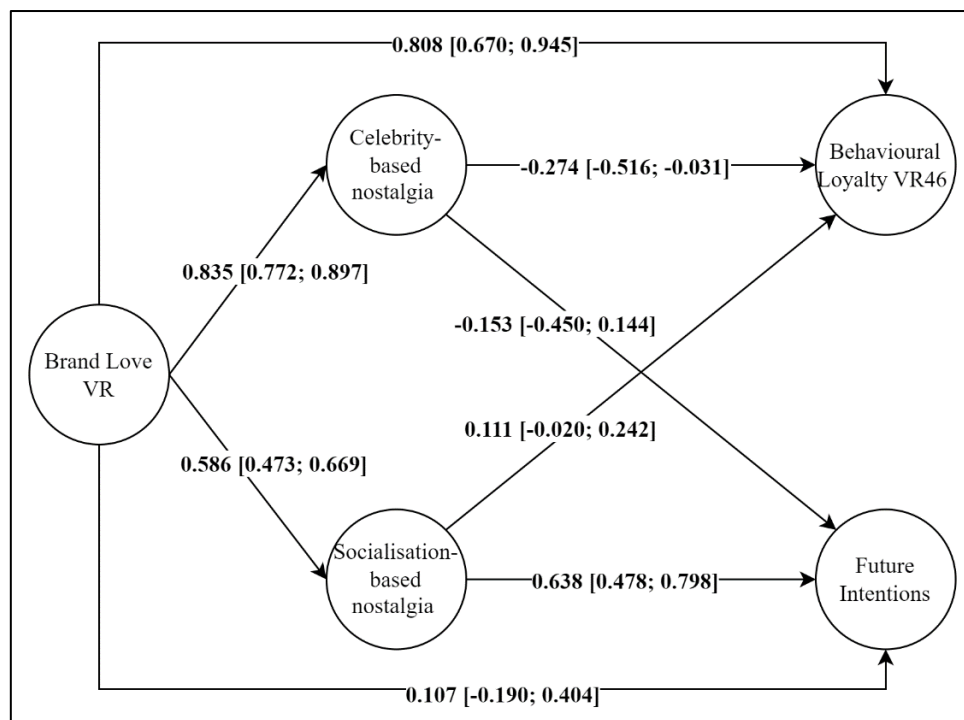
## **Method and Result**

The data collection for the current investigation was conducted through an intercept survey in Emilia Romagna (a region in northern Italy). The questionnaire was administered to live spectators during the "Gran Premio motociclistico di San Marino e della Riviera di Rimini 2022" event in September 2022. The following constructs were measured: 1. brand love for Valentino Rossi (BLVR) using Bagozzi et al. (2017) short-form scale, 2. Celebrity-based nostalgia (NCEL) and socialisation-based nostalgia (NSOC) drawing the items from Cho et al. (2020), 3. behavioural loyalty to the VR46 brand (LOYVR) using the measures from

Watson et al. (2015), and finally, 4. future intentions (FI) using the items of Prayag and Grivel (2018). The data collection resulted in 230 valid responses. Most of the respondents were males (65.21%), older than 40 years old (55.02%), with at least a high school diploma (72.15 %).

All analyses were conducted in R, using mainly Lavaan and SemTools packages (Jorgensen et al., 2023; R Core Team, 2022; Rosseel, 2012). Measures validity was tested via CFA. Overall, the measurement model showed an acceptable fit for the data ( $\chi^2= 321.211$ ,  $df= 179$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.059$ , 90% CI [0.048; 0.069],  $CFI = 0.965$ ,  $TLI = 0.959$ ,  $SRMR = 0.041$ ). After ensuring measurement validity, a structural model was estimated, and the results are reported in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: The estimated model**



**Note.** Between [square brackets], the estimates' standardised 95 % confidence intervals are reported.

### Discussion and Limitations

Several insights arise from the findings of this study. Firstly, the significant positive impact of BLVR on LOYVR underscores the profound emotional bond that fans share with Rossi. This connection is likely to foster a robust sense of loyalty, often translating into purchases of merchandise associated with the sports icon. However, intriguingly, this attachment to the

nine-time world champion does not appear to significantly influence fans' inclination to participate in future Moto GP events. The lack of significance in the effect observed on FI suggests that while fans possess a strong emotional attachment to Rossi, this sentiment may not necessarily directly correlate with their intent to attend live sports events.

Furthermore, the positive influence of BLVR on NCEL and NSOC can be explained by the deep emotional connection fans still feel to Rossi. As fans admire and forge a connection with Rossi, they are more inclined to recollect his iconic moments and the social experiences interwoven with his career. Additionally, the positive effect of NSOC on FI implies that fans who cherish positive memories of social interactions during sporting events exhibit heightened motivation to participate in similar gatherings in the future. This is further corroborated by the positive mediating effect of NSOC on the relationship between BLVR and FI. However, it's notable that NSOC does not significantly impact fans' LOYVR. This absence of significance in the relationship with fans' behavioural loyalty may posit the non-existence of such a link.

Intriguingly, the most unexpected findings pertain to the adverse direct and indirect effects of NCEL on LOYVR. This suggests that an excess of nostalgia for a celebrity figure might lead to a less committed and potentially more critical fan base, potentially impinging on loyalty. Fans overly fixated on the past may unfavourably contrast it with the present, affecting their loyalty. This critical evaluation of the present vis-à-vis past experiences could counteract the positive effects that brand love for retired athletes has on loyalty.

Finally, this study has limitations. Self-report questionnaires, while common, can be influenced by social desirability bias and emotional state during completion. Additionally, the study's findings may be constrained by a limited sample size, impacting the extent to which results can be generalised to a larger population of Valentino Rossi fans or similar contexts. Future research can enhance reliability by combining diverse data sources. Also, it is important to acknowledge that findings related to sports celebrities might not universally apply to other fields like music or politics. Comparative studies among different types of human brands can offer deeper insights into these variations.

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