

The Role of Brand Equity in Building Fan Loyalty: an Application on Football Fans

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ABSTRACT

Aim: The concepts of branding and sport marketing have begun to gain importance along with the current developments in sport industry. The fans have great importance on teams' branding in the world, especially in our country. As the importance of fans increases on teams' branding, the number of studies carried out on these subject increases, as well

Methodology: These research studies are especially carried out within the framework of the Fan-Based Brand Equity model. This study investigates the impact of the brand equity dimensions (brand awareness, brand associations and perceived quality) on fan loyalty in football teams. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was used to reveal the relationship between the factors affecting fan loyalty and to evaluate the fit of model. This research was administered to 502 volunteer fans of Atiker Konyaspor Club, one of the leading clubs of Turkey Sport Toto Super League, in the 2018-2019 season of Lefter Küçükandonyadis in Turkey.

Results and Conclusion: As a result, it was observed that while two of the brand equity dimensions, brand associations and perceived quality, had positive effects on fan loyalty, the third dimension, brand awareness, had no effect on the model, concerning fan loyalty. Upgrading sports clubs' attributes and giving importance to the brand association had statistically significant influence on fan loyalty.

Key Words: Brand Equity, Fan Loyalty, Football Clubs, Sports Marketing, Structural Equation Modelling.

INTRODUCTION

The sports sector, which has become an important market today, has brought along the competition. The clubs involved in this sector focus on branding in order to compete. A great number of people in the marketing world urge that knowing brand equity and managing brand are of great importance in terms of gaining a competitive advantage¹. Aaker 1991², argues that organizations with powerful brands have many advantages such as satisfying customer and providing customer loyalty. Therefore, the competitive power of sports clubs is in direct proportion to their brand equities³. Fans have great importance on clubs' brand equities. In terms of marketing, fans are potential and active customers of clubs. Clubs' being successful in both economic and sportive areas has positive effects on their brand equities⁴. Since creating and managing a sports brand has gained importance in the last decade, studies on brand equity in the sports sector have become more important³. Though some researchers and sport managers know very little about creating brand equity, they consider their organisations as brands. Sport and fan experiences are of importance on how to create brand equity in sports. The concepts of creating the brand equity of a team and managing it as a brand are paradigms whose importance is increasing day by day in the sports market⁵. Strong brands are established on a trust dependent on customer experience. This mostly applies to professional sports like football⁶.

As it is mentioned above, the significance of fans is indisputable in the continuation of the clubs' existence in competitive sports industry. The creation and maintenance of sports brands are dependent on fulfilling and satisfying wishes, needs and desires of the fans. The brands of teams operating in the sport sector can fulfil the brand

management in a more successful way with activities such as creating new income areas, using resources properly, satisfying fans, having a loyal mass by retaining them, thus, they can achieve greater successes^{7,8,9}. The sports teams are more advantageous than normal companies in this respect because they have a greater fan or customer groups compared to other sectors, thus, a more emotional commitment occurs¹⁰. It can be said that healthier results could be achieved by taking the consumers, in other words fans, in the sports sector as a basis in terms of brand equity creation. This should also be taken into account on creating brand equity by considering approaches of fans related to football clubs. Because the extent that the brand of a sports club is recognized by the fans or whether history, color, shape, location, and symbols of the team or combinations of these unite the team affects the loyalty levels and behavioral manners of the fans.

In the sport environment, brand equity refers to the value that fans attach to their favorite team's name and symbol¹¹. The satisfied consumers will, in turn, become brand loyal or repeat purchasers. Gladden et al.¹² proposed a brand equity assessment model for the sports industry. The authors explain brand equity by extending the previous work of Aaker² who believes that there brand equity encompasses four major elements: perceived quality, brand awareness, brand associations, and brand loyalty.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the fan loyalty in sports marketing by utilizing the Fan-Based Brand Equity model. It was urged that independent variables of brand awareness, brand association, and perceived quality affected brand loyalty positively. A model was developed in accordance with this information and the research was conducted within the scope of this model.

Conceptual Framework and Development of Hypotheses

Brand-Equity in Sports

In the brand equity literature, "Brand Equity Creating Model" by Aaker², "Managing Brand- Equity" and "Customer-Based Brand Equity Pyramid" by Keller¹⁴ are still the most well-known and used frameworks among academics and marketing practitioners. Aaker² discusses customer-based brand equity as a symbol dependent group of assets added to the name of a brand or the value provided to customers by a product or service¹³. Aaker² defines the brand equity as a group of assets and liabilities increasing (or decreasing) the value provided to the company or its users through a product or service associated with a brand, brand name or symbol". On the other hand, Keller¹³, argues that the consumer-based brand equity has a different effect created by reactions given by the consumers dependent on the brand knowledge related to the marketing of the brand. Since sport is an abstract concept (service) according to Aaker and Keller, it is considered that brand equity should be studied on concrete products mostly. However, Ross⁵, urges the Fan-Based Brand Equity (FBBE) arguing that the experiences of fans, regarded as customers in the sport, are important. Due to unique characteristics of sports as a service, it should be taken into consideration that consumer experience is important in order to understand Fan Based Brand Equity. Fan-Based Brand Equity consists of two main components of brand association and brand awareness in which consumers prefer and assess the sports service. This model shows that brand awareness and brand association are the basis of creating the Fan-Based Brand Equity and thus, they have effects on brand equity in sports Ross⁵; Bandhu¹⁵. Another significance of the model is that the brand loyalty, named after as the loyalty to the team supported, is a result, not a component, of the Fan-Based Brand Equity Klouman & Beljuli¹⁰. This study was established on fan loyalty, considered as a result output.

Brand equity in sports is defined as the value given to the name and symbol of the team supported by fans as consumers Gladden & Milne¹¹. They are all assets providing an additional value to the fan or brand owner club related to the name or symbol of the brand. These values consist of four dimensions: perceived quality, brand association, brand loyalty and brand awareness. These four dimensions related to brand equity provide a great advantage for brands in today's competitive environment. In other words, perceived quality, loyalty level, association power and recognition level of a club brand refer to the brand equity. Therefore, it can be said that the club, grounding on fans as consumers, will be successful in creating brand equity Alkibay¹⁶. In other words, successful brands can establish strong personal and emotional relationships with consumers and influence their loyalty and buying behaviors because, especially in terms of football, the relationship between consumers and the team they support is very strong Biscaia¹⁷.

The Relationship between Brand Associations with Fan Loyalty

Brand associations and brand recall explain reasons for customer decisions and their loyalty to brand. Existing

research discuss that product and organisation associations are two classifications benefited mostly in brand associations¹⁸. Rio et al.¹⁹ suggested that brand associations are the key for the formation and management of brand equity. For this reason, strong brand equity shows that customers have a good recall and a positive feeling related to the brand in their minds. Examination of brand associations among sport team fans is of great importance in order to verify an established framework. Brand associations are crucial in creating brand loyalty and brand equity²⁰. Researchers in the sports industry reported that the characteristics of a particular team or club related to its fans include team success, team players, head coach, team management, logo design, stadium, tradition and product delivery^{21,22,23}. Later on, Bauer et al.²⁴ added team loyalty to the measurement models of sports teams brand associations suggested by Gladden and Funk²³, and thus, developed a 20 factors sports brand image association set. These 20 association factors are as follows: team, coach, success, star player, team performance, logo and club colours, club history and tradition, stadium, fans, fan identity, acceptance of friends, escape, socializing, feelings, nostalgia, entertainment, uniqueness, reliable, positivity, sympathetic. Of the brand association types, benefits and attitudes were not discussed in this study. The category of attributes was utilised and non-product-related brand attributes such as logo, stadium, product distribution and tradition were used.

Gladden and Funk²³, investigated the relationship between brand associations and brand loyalty among a large group consisting of 929 professional sports fans. They developed a model and presented that there was a relationship among brand association factors (attributes, attitudes and benefits) and the brand loyalty among fans. Bauer et al.²¹ and Bauer et al.²⁵ argued in their studies carried out on German football teams that brand association dimensions resulted in brand equity and the driving force of fan loyalty was success, and there was a positive relationship between brand association dimensions and fan brand loyalty. Significant and positive relationships were found out between fan brand loyalty and attributes and benefits dimensions of brand associations²⁸. The concept of brand loyalty may be defined with dimensions of brand associations (attributes, benefits and attitudes). These dimensions give accurate insights related to brand loyalties of fans²⁸. Sajjadi et al.²⁷ conducted a study on sports specialists and fans in order to investigate the factors affecting brand equity of popular football clubs in Iran. It was found out as a result of the study that team history, management, success, coach, stadium, star player, media, logo, fan loyalty and sponsors were effective on brand equities of teams. Similar relationships were also supported by the studies carried out by different researchers^{28,20,29,30,31,32}. In a different study, Erdener et al.²⁶ examined the relationship between brand associations and the loyalty of professional sport branch fans using the model developed by²³. They reported that brand association dimensions were a good determiner for the brand loyalty of fans. Funk et al.³⁸ found out that sports consumer motivational factors explained 60% of the variance of loyalty to football club in some issues such as continuation of the play, media use, wearing team-related

clothes and buying team-related products. What is more, it is suggested that there is a relationship between brand associations and brand loyalty^{2,34,35,36,37,38,25,39,31,40,41,42}. Based on these research results, we can establish the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1. Brand associations have an effect on fan loyalty.

The Relationship between Brand Awareness with Fan Loyalty

Brand awareness includes recognition of a brand in the mind of the consumer, and it is defined as a customer's perception of the brand differently than the others². Brand awareness involves the associations such as name, logo, symbol etc. of the brand in the minds of the customers⁴³.

Sports teams, especially football teams, have a high level of popularity and brand awareness. Bauer²¹ urge in their study conducted on German football teams that the brand equity for football teams cannot be considered as a separate, distinct dimension since teams' brand awareness is very high and these teams have been heard and known almost by everybody. Although football teams have high levels of recognition, sports clubs should provide environments that enable people to try the products of famous footballers, who will create online impact, at first hand by organizing live and personal events, and promotions through different media channels such as TV, magazines, social media and e-mail, and become sponsor for local events to create brand awareness.

Fan-Based Brand Equity consists of two main components: brand association and brand awareness through which consumers choose and evaluate sports service. This model shows that brand association and brand awareness are based on creating a Fan-Based Brand Equity and thus, they have effects on the brand equity in sports^{5,15}. Another significance of the model is that the brand loyalty, named after the loyalty behavior to the team supported, is a result of the Fan-Based Brand Equity rather than a component of it¹⁰. Ross et al.³ argues that brand awareness has an important role in consumer decisions due to several reasons. For example, when a consumer thinks of a brand category such as a football club, it is important that a particular brand such as FC Barcelona is remembered³. However, Gladden and Funk²³ suggested that this is not a general situation because teams playing in amateur leagues could not have such an advantage. In different brand equity researches Alkhalaf⁴⁴; Balaji⁴⁵ Ishaq et al.³⁵; Krystallis & Chrysochou⁴⁶; Shabbir & Rehman⁴⁷; Su & Chang⁴⁸; Torres et al.⁴⁹; Yıldız & Koçan⁸ it has also been urged that there is a relationship between brand equity and brand loyalty. Therefore, it is likely to establish the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2. Brand awareness has an effect on fan brand loyalty.

The relationship between Perceived Quality with Fan Loyalty

Perceived quality is defined as a general evaluation of the judgment of customer on the superiority and excellence of the product⁶⁰. Another definition of the perceived quality is that the additional price that the consumers are willing to pay in return for the goods and services they receive.

The brand has both physical and psychological

dimensions. While the physical dimension consists of various elements including image such as logo, packaging, design, shape, colour, psychological dimension contains the elements associated with the product, such as beliefs and values. Quality perception is related to the functional values of the product as well as the abstract values it provides to the customer. The value of brands perceived as high-quality by the consumer will be higher compared to other brands. Perceived quality contributes to creating value in different ways. For this reason, perceived quality in sports clubs can be defined with great players, infrastructure projects, stadium, watching pleasure and aesthetics, success perception of team and wins and losses.

The perceived quality in the sports world relates to the success achieved by a team. Gladden, Milne and Sutton¹², define the perceived quality in sport as the perception of consumers related to the success of a team. Matches and championships won one after another will create a high-quality perception. On the contrary, in the event that a team wins only one match or becomes champion once will result in a lower quality perception⁵⁰. On the other hand, there is often a misperception that the only factor creating brand equity is the winning of team, and this perception is a marketing myopia⁵¹. If a team wins matches, this increases its brand equity in the short term, but this factor alone is not enough for the long term. Although most of the others in which customers have little loyalty to low quality brand, the fans of professional sport teams are very loyal to their team even if their favorite team doesn't play well⁵². In their study conducted on Turkey football teams, Sevilmiş and Şirin⁵³, concluded that, while the linear effects of the dimensions of physical environment quality, interaction quality, and core service quality on the club value, perceived by the spectator was identified, it was found that the dimension, whose the effect of core service quality was the most, was stadium service quality. Chow et al.⁵⁴, Gil et al.³⁴, Hameed⁵⁵, Saydan⁵⁶, Khan et al.⁵⁷, Sevilmiş and Şirin⁵³, Shabbir and Rehman⁴⁷, Torres et al.⁴⁹, that there is a relationship between the perceived quality and the brand loyalty. Therefore, following hypothesis could be established in this respect.

Hypothesis 3. Perceived quality has an effect on fan loyalty.

Proposed Hypothetical Model

In this research, brand awareness was explained with the dimensions of brand associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty accepted by Aaker⁵⁸, Kamakura and Russel⁵⁹, Park and Srinivasan⁶⁰, Lassar et al.⁶¹, Yoo et al.³⁶, Yoo and Donthu⁶², Washburn and Plank⁶³, Ailawadi et al.⁶⁴, Kim et al.⁶⁵, Netemeyer et al.¹³ in parallel with the classification made by Aaker² and Keller¹⁴. The research model was determined as the effect of the variables of brand associations, brand awareness and perceived quality on fan loyalty. The related literature was examined in accordance with this purpose, the model of research was created. Research model is seen in figure 1.

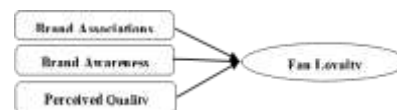


Fig. 1 Research model

The Population and Sample of Research: The population of study is constituted by the group of spectators of Atiker Konyaspor football matches in the stadium and residing in Konya.

The sample of research includes 502 Atiker Konyaspor fans, who came to watch the matches between Atiker Konyaspor and Besiktas (252 individuals) on 07.10.2018 and Atiker Konyaspor and Medipol Basaksehir (250 individuals) at the Stadium of Konya Metropolitan Municipality in 2018-2019 Season of Lefter Kucukandonyadis Turkey Spor Toto Super League, and they were selected by simple random sampling. The reason for limiting the study with the fans of Atiker Konyaspor is that it is the champion of Ziraat Turkish Cup in the 2016-2017 season and Turkcell Super Cup in the 2017-2018 season. It is considered that this contributed to the brand equity of the club.

Data Collection Tools and Techniques: In this research, questionnaire technique was used for data collection. It is given in the following Table 1 that the scale of brand equity developed for measuring its role in creating fan loyalty, and each item taken from which sources, and how they were expressed by transforming.

Table 1 Resources Adopted in the Creation the Questionnaire Form Developed for Measuring the Role of Brand Equity in Establishing Fan Loyalty

Brand awareness Aaker ⁵⁸ , Berry ⁶⁶ , Yoo and Donthu ⁶² , Kim <i>et al.</i> ⁶⁸ , Biscaia <i>et al.</i> ⁶ .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ My team is known worldwide ○ My team comes to mind first among the other teams in Turkey ○ My team is known more than its opponents ○ Transfer of star player increases my team awareness
Brand associations Aaker ⁵⁸ , Gladden and Milne ¹¹ , Yoo <i>et al.</i> ³⁶ , Gladden and Funk ²³ , Biscaia <i>et al.</i> ⁶ .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ I feel good when my team wins ○ When I hear music, slogan or march related to sports, my team comes to my mind immediately ○ Even if it is not the licensed product of my team, the colours associating my team is the reason for me to buy a product ○ When I see the colours of my team anywhere, my team comes to mind immediately
Perceived quality Aaker ^{2,58} , Yoo <i>et al.</i> ³⁶ , Yoo and Donthu ⁶² , Kim and Kim ⁶⁷ , Kim <i>et al.</i> ⁶⁸ .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Having star players in my team is effective for me to become one of its fans ○ The stadium and social facilities of my team are modern and of good quality ○ The licensed products of my team are of good quality ○ The activities and products of my team have a positive image compared to other teams
Fan Loyalty Mahony <i>et al.</i> ⁶⁹ , Yoo and Donthu ⁶² , Ailawadi <i>et al.</i> ⁷⁰ , Kim and Kim ⁶⁷ , Bauer <i>et al.</i> ²⁴ , Kim <i>et al.</i> (2008), Biscaia <i>et al.</i> ⁶ .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ I consider myself a loyal fan of my team. ○ Even if my team gets unsuccessful, it is difficult to change my mind about it. ○ I feel the success of my team as my own ○ When talking about my team, I use the word "we" instead of "they".

There are sixteen expressions, which are created for determining the effect of brand equity dimensions (brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality) on fan loyalty in sports clubs, constitute the basis of the research model. There are four variables in the research model. Each of these variables includes four expressions (brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality and fan loyalty). Accordingly, the model consists of 4 variables and 16 expressions. Fans were asked to evaluate the expressions and score them in a range of (1) "Strongly Disagree" and (5) "Strongly Agree" to measure their brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality and fan loyalty towards the Atiker Konyaspor club. Two questions were asked to determine the gender and age of the fans in the second part of the questionnaire.

Ethical Clearance

Ethical principles were also considered in the current

study. This study was conducted according to the Helsinki Declaration. We informed the sports club about the research. We had a meeting with the fan group heads and requested support for the research. All the volunteers participating in the research signed the informed consent (volunteer) form and completed a personal information form. We submitted information and documents related to all these processes to the Selçuk University Faculty of Sport Sciences Ethics Committee for Non-Interventional Studies. The approval for this cross-sectional study was obtained from the Ethics Committee for NonInterventional Studies, Selçuk University, Faculty of Sports Science (2020/40990478-050.99/09).

Data Analysis

Structural Equation Modelling – SEM was used to test the conceptual model of the study. SEM is an effective model testing method that can explain the cause-effect relationship between variables, and enable the theoretical models to be tested as a whole. Therefore, it can be stated that SEM is a multivariate statistical analysis technique that is used to analyse structural relationships existing in the mind of the researcher before the investigation is conducted, through the data obtained from the research. The goodness of fit indices were evaluated based on the LISREL program in SEM analysis. Exploratory Factor Analysis was administrated in order to examine whether the scales had the dimensions reported in the literature before performing the SEM analysis. The data collected from the participants were analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 22 and LISREL 8.80. Cronbach alpha technique, Pearson Correlation Coefficient analysis, explanatory factor analysis, confirmatory factor analysis, and goodness of fit statistics were used for the evaluation of the data.

Factors/items	Factor Loading	Explained variance (%)	Eigen value	α
Factor 1: Fan Loyalty (FL)				
FL1 Even if my team gets unsuccessful, it is quite difficult to change my opinions about it.	0.716	36.093	5.775	0.807
FL2 I feel the success of my team as my own.	0.693			
FL3 I consider myself a loyal fan of my team.	0.682			
Factor 2: Brand Associations (BAS)				
BAS1 When I hear music, slogan or march related to sports, my team comes to my mind immediately.	0.744	11.453	1.833	0.773
BAS2 I feel good when my team wins.	0.672			
BAS3 Even if it is not the licensed product of my team, the colours associating my team is the reason for me to buy a product.	0.612			
BAS4 When I see the colours of my team anywhere, my team comes to my mind immediately.	0.537			
Factor 4: Brand Awareness (BAW)				
BAW1 My team is known worldwide.	0.847	7.420	1.187	0.740
BAW2 My team comes to mind first among the other teams in Turkey.	0.694			
BAW3 My team is known more than its opponents.	0.626			
BAW4 Transfer of star player increases my team awareness.	0.423			
Factor 5: Perceived Quality (PQ)				
PQ2 The licensed products of my team are of good quality.	0.816	6.708	1.073	0.720
PQ3 The stadium and social facilities of my team are modern and of good quality	0.509			
PQ4 The activities and products of my team have a positive image compared to other teams	0.498			

Exploratory Factor Analysis for Research Scale

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was carried out to

explore the representation power of the scale dimensions' factors. EFA on the data indicated a clear four-factor structure (4 factors with eigenvalues greater than 1) with the selected 16-items. Items with the factor loading 0.40 and above were taken into consideration. Two expressions with factor loading below 0.40 were not included in the factors. These factors explain 50.223% of the total variance. (KMO measure of sampling adequacy: 88.8% Barlett Sphericity Test: 3042.980, $p < 0.000$). Observed variables, factor loadings, percentage of variance and eigenvalues are shown in the table 2.

To conclude, 4 variables in the research scale were grouped under 4 factors. As the factor loadings of the dimensions of "FL4. When talking about my team, I use the word "we" instead they" and "PQ1. Having star players in my team is effective for me to become one of its fans" were under 0.40, and they were not included in the scale. Results of EFA together with the percentage of total variance for each factor and calculated Cronbach's alpha scores are shown in Table 2. Factor loadings ranged from 0.42 to 0.84 and Cronbach's alphas ranged from 0.72 to 0.81.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

CFA, used for testing the validity and reliability of the scale and confirming the factors defined in EFA, calculates some values showing the statistical significance and the fit of the suggested model.

Table 3 Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results for Scale*

Factors	Standardized loadings	t-value	R ²	Mean	SD
Brand Awareness (BAW)					
BAW1	0.63	14.27	0.40	2.94	1.24
BAW2	0.86	19.83	0.53	3.01	1.25
BAW3	0.75	17.05	0.56	3.16	1.24
BAW4**	-	-	-	-	-
Brand Associations (BAS)					
BAS1	0.69	16.13	0.48	3.66	1.17
BAS2	0.70	16.26	0.48	3.51	1.19
BAS3	0.65	14.89	0.42	3.24	1.26
BAS4	0.68	15.74	0.46	3.59	1.18
Perceived Quality (PQ)					
PQ2	0.62	13.48	0.38	3.66	1.08
PQ3	0.73	16.54	0.54	3.57	1.09
PQ4	0.70	15.57	0.49	3.57	1.09
Fan Loyalty (FL)					
FL1	0.79	19.50	0.62	3.51	1.20
FL2	0.81	20.49	0.66	3.61	1.19
FL3	0.73	17.58	0.53	3.50	1.19

*Goodness of fit index (gfi): $p < 0.05$, $\chi^2=144.60$, Degree of Freedom (sd)=59, $\chi^2/sd=2.45$, RMSEA=0.054, NFI= 0.97, NNFI= 0.97, CFI= 0.98,IFI=0.98, RFI= 0.96, GFI= 0.96, AGFI=0.93.

Items deleted DFA

Note: RMSEA (Root Mean Square Error of Approximation), GFI (Goodness of Fit Index), AGFI (Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index), RFI (Relative Fit Index), CFI (Comparative Fit Index), NFI (Normed Fit Index), NNFI (Non-normed Fit Index), IFI (Incremental Fit Index).

When the results of CFA were examined in terms of both goodness of fit indices (Schermelleh-Engel et al.72) and standardized parameter values between the observed variables and latent variables (structures) of the measurement model, it was seen that the values of model provided significant results at the level of 0.01 ($t > 2.576$). In addition, when evaluating the results of the measurement model in terms of ensuring the construct reliability, it may

be urged as evidence for convergent validity that the relationships defining structures were higher than 0.59 and were significant at the 0.01 level (Hair et al.71), construct reliability values were higher than the limit value of 0.50 recommended by Fornell and Larcker73, and factor loadings for each item was generally under the related factor with an extreme loading (quite high). It can also be stated that correlation estimations between factors were extremely high and this is an evidence for the discriminant validity of this model.

Testing Research Model

Following the confirmation of the main variables of the research model, Structural Equation Modelling (path analysis) was used to test the structural model, in other words, hypotheses. Path analysis was used to determine the effect of brand equity dimensions (brand awareness, brand association and perceived quality) on fan loyalty. The results of the fit indices ($\chi^2/df = 2.45$; RMSEA = 0.054; AGFI = 0.93; CFI = 0.98; NFI = 0.97; NNFI = 0.97; RFI = 0.96; IFI = 0.96; GFI = 0.99) related to structural model show that developed conceptual model has perfect fit with the data almost in all parameters, and the model is statistically valid and significant. In this regard, the necessity of a statistically valid model for the assessment of hypotheses in the research was met.

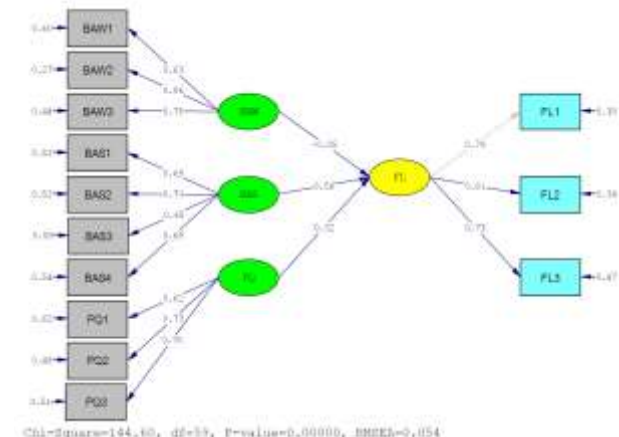


Figure 2. Results of SEM Analysis for Conceptual Model

Examining the path diagram in Figure 2, it is seen that brand awareness as brand equity dimension did not have an effect on fan loyalty, while brand association and perceived quality had an effect on fan loyalty.

Table 4. Standardized Solution, T Values and Hypotheses Results

Hypotheses	Paths	Standardized parameter estimate values	t values * $p < 0.01$	Results
H ₁	BAW → FL	-0.05	-1.04	Not Verified
H ₂	BAS → FL	0.56	7.63*	Verified
H ₃	PQ → FL	0.32	4.40*	Verified
Structural Equation				
FL = -0.05BAW + 0.56*BAS + 0.32PQ			R ² =0.63	

As it is seen in Table 5, while it was found out that brand associations (H2: $\beta=0.56$, $p < 0.01$) and perceived quality (H3: $\beta=0.32$, $p < 0.01$) had a positive and significant effect on fan loyalty, brand awareness did not have a significant effect on it. Accordingly, whereas the hypothesis of "H1:

Brand awareness has a positive effect on fan loyalty” was rejected, the hypotheses of “H2: Brand association has a positive effect on fan loyalty” and “H3: Perceived quality has a positive effect on fan loyalty” were confirmed. It is also observed that independent latent variable of “Brand Associations” affected the dependent latent variable of “Fan Loyalty” positively. The correlation coefficient between the variables of brand associations and fan loyalty is 0.56. In other words, 1 unit increase in brand associations of the fans increases fan loyalty by 0.56 units, and vice versa. It is seen that the independent latent variable of “perceived quality” affected the dependent latent variable of “fan loyalty” positively. The coefficient of correlation between perceived quality and fan loyalty is 0.32. In this sense, a 1 unit increase in the perceptions of fans about quality increases fan loyalty by 0.32 units.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

It is getting extremely difficult to attract fans due to increasingly competitive nature of sports market. However, this is valid not only for sports clubs, but also for all sectors, and the expectations of customers are rising rapidly day by day⁷⁴. Creating and maintaining a successful sports brand can only be achieved by satisfying the requests and needs of the fans. Sports team brands become successful to the extent of their abilities to provide benefit for their fans, satisfying, and reassuring them. Having loyal fans, using sources correctly and creating new income sources are also other crucial factors. Furthermore, clubs struggle to create customer-based brand equity of their clubs by managing the perceptions and associations, behaviours and attitudes in the minds of their fans towards sports clubs. Brand and brand management especially in the sports field, which is one of the most important actors of the hedonic service industry, have wide application area⁷⁵.

Based on the examination of the effect of brand equity dimensions (brand awareness, brand association and perceived quality) on fan loyalty, following conclusions were drawn: The club, with whose fans this study was conducted, is the champion of Ziraat Turkish Cup in the 2016-2017 season and Turkcell Super Cup in the 2017-2018 season. In addition, Konya Metropolitan Municipality Stadium took part among the top 5 stadiums in the world in the contest of “the best stadiums of 2014” where 32 stadiums from 20 countries competed in. These results show that the club and the stadium involved in the study have the necessary infrastructure to create brand equity.

In this study, fan loyalty has been evaluated related to the concepts of brand associations, brand awareness and perceived service quality. In this manner, a model revealing that brand equity (brand associations, brand awareness and perceived service quality) affected fan loyalty was developed within the frame of the present theoretical structure. After the validity and reliability analysis of the scales in the research were administrated, three basic hypotheses developed in accordance with the purpose and model of the study were tested with the structural equation modelling. Although a large number of customer-based brand equity and a sufficient number of research related to sports clubs were carried out in the related literature, no research has been done about the role of fans' perceptions of customer-based brand equity in creating fan loyalty.

In this research, the model created for determining the relationship between fans' perceptions of customer-based brand equity and fan loyalty was tested by using the technique of “path analysis”. The analysis showed that proposed model has high goodness-of-fit. In other words, it is understood according to the results of the analysis that the proposed model was confirmed.

The findings also showed that the relationship between brand awareness of fans and their perceptions of fan loyalty was not statistically significant. This result does not coincide with some research findings urged in the literature (Alkhawaldeh et al.⁴⁴; Balaji⁴⁵; Ishaq et al.³⁵; Krystallis & Chrysochou⁴⁶; Shabbir & Rehman⁴⁷; Su & Chang⁴⁸; Torres et al.⁴⁹; Yıldız & Koçan⁸) that the customers have higher loyalty if they are already aware of the brand.

Brand awareness is related to the ability of the consumer to recognise and keep in mind the brand under various conditions. However, sports teams, especially football teams, have a high level of recognition and brand awareness. Moreover, Bauer et al.²¹ argue in their study conducted on German football teams that the brand equity for football teams cannot be considered as a distinct, separate dimension since teams' brand awareness is very high and these teams have been heard and known almost by everybody. Since the fan loyalty does not affect the brand awareness in this study, it can be explained with the fact that the football team, which is the subject of this research, is a very well-known team by almost everybody owing to its success in Turkey in recent years. In addition, this is also uncovered by the fact that brand awareness does not have a significant contribution to the brand equity Bauer et al.²¹; Bauer et al.²⁵; Bauer et al.²⁴; Aaker² concerning the sports clubs emphasised in the literature.

It was also achieved as a result of this research that besides the fact that the relationship between brand associations and fan loyalty is statistically significant, the effect of brand associations on fan loyalty is very strong. It was also found that fan loyalty develops with the attributes fans create in their minds about their clubs and increases with brand associations. In other words, it can be said that it helps those clubs to create brand equity and leads to fan loyalty by managing the perceptions and associations, behaviours and attitudes in the minds of fans towards sports clubs. This result coincides with the findings in the literature suggesting that the brand associations conducted with the other different sample groups have a positive effect on brand loyalty^{76,35}.

Brand associations Gladden & Funk²³, which are one of the factors that examine the experiential and emotional benefits obtained by the consumption and creates the brand equity, are classified into three main categories in football clubs. These are attributes, benefits and attitudes¹⁴. In this research, the benefits and attitudes of brand association types were ignored. In terms of attributes category in the research; non-product-related brand attributes including logo, stadium, product delivery and tradition have been measured and the product-related attributes (success, star player, technical director, management) were not evaluated. This can also be explained as follows: non-product-related brand attributes (tradition, stadium, and brand signs) have a positive impact

on fan loyalty, since they have more symbolic and differentiating characteristics and include team colour permanence.

The brand associations can be seen in any form in sport marketing activities. The brand associations may depend on the product-related attributes in sports marketing or they may be dependent on non-product-related brand attributes as well¹⁸. Bauer et al.²⁵ and Keller's¹⁴ studies supported our research findings. They examined the relationship between the attributes of the association types and the fan loyalty; they stated that non-product-related brand attributes are more important than the product-related attributes in fan loyalty. In a similar study on German football teams, Bauer et al.²⁴ has found that both non-product-related brand attributes and product-related attributes have positive impact on benefits and the benefits also have positive impact on attitudinal loyalty. In this study as in the studies of Bauer et al.²⁴; the benefits were found to have a positive effect on loyalty.

Gladden and Funk²², who partly supported our research findings, found a positive relationship between fan identity, escape, nostalgia, product access, associations, and brand loyalty and they found a negative relationship between tradition, star player, peer group acceptance and brand loyalty in their study based on the examination of the relationships between brand loyalty and 13 brand associations in sport. Loyal fans have the motivation of monitoring the team and buying their commercial products. Therefore, not only the high level success of the team in the field, but also the integration of the feelings related to the basic symbols of brand can also lead to fan loyalty. These fans do not change their loyalty immediately by making a long-term assessment of the past, when the team is not successful in the field. This is important for the future investments of the club. Loyal fans feel pressure to support the team to ensure club's financial viability. This financial support will be beneficial for the club to purchase high-quality star players with the intention of increasing team performance for next year⁷⁷.

In the research, it has been concluded that the relationship between perceived quality and fan loyalty is statistically significant. This finding coincides with the research findings Al-Rousan & Mohamed⁷⁷; Balaji⁴⁵; Saydan⁵⁶; Shabbir & Rehman⁴⁷; Alhaddad⁷⁸; Torres et al.⁴⁹; Chow et al.⁵⁴ that the perceived quality in different sectors directly affects brand loyalty. Parasuraman et al.⁷⁹ as pioneer researchers in that field also supported our research findings, proving the existence of a meaningful and direct relationship between service quality and loyalty in their research in different sectors. They provided an insight about how enterprises can understand the customer-based impact of service quality identifying positive or negative behaviours that may arise as a result of high or low quality of service perceived by customers. According to Zeithaml et al.⁸⁰ if perceived service quality is higher than expected, the customers can be loyal to the service company, and they can recommend the company to others. They even accept to pay more for the offered service.

Today, football clubs are trying to create fan loyalty for their long-term service. Therefore, service quality is quite important to create loyalty. The perceived quality

related to sports clubs can be defined by major players, infrastructure projects, stadium, pleasure of watching and aesthetics, the team's perception of success and wins and losses. Although the perceived quality of sports is mostly related to the success perception of a team, the perceived quality is important, because it is so difficult to recover from the failure perception (namely the perception of poor quality) like in other sectors (a sport team with an isolated year of success would probably have a lower quality perception than a team with long-term, consistent success in the market).

However, it is known that the most important ignored element in the marketing of industrial sports is fanaticism. Just because the success is high, the price and quality are appropriate, Liverpool FC fans do not agree with Manchester United FC and do not prefer licensed products. This is explained only with the fanaticism category. Nevertheless, it is clear that an excessive competition is observed in football field. Therefore it is not easy to have a loyal fan group, to satisfy the fans and to maintain the fan satisfaction. Therefore, fan loyalty can be increased by using various methods such as having a healthy communication, having a voice in the competitive environment, creating a sense of belonging and being open-minded for innovative ideas. If a football club can act according to the wishes and expectations of its fans and if it can provide higher quality services; then it can increase the number of its fans and gain high income. It is important to adopt a fan / customer-oriented process control to achieve this goal in sports clubs as well like in other service business sectors.

Conclusions Limitations and Future Research

The results of this study present some significant practical conclusions. One of the most important results in this study is the positive effect of brand associations and perceived quality on fan loyalty. Results, considering the brand equity perceptions of football club fans; it is seen that brand associations strongly affect the fan loyalty and the perceived quality moderately affects the fan loyalty. In addition, it has been determined that the customer-based brand equity and brand awareness perceptions did not affect the fan loyalty. Based on these results, sports team managers should develop long-term and regular brand communication strategies to be able to communicate with their fans upon positive associations. The teams should relentlessly implement the programs and place positive associations related to the team using many communication tools.

Sustainable market success for professional football brands depends on their ability to raise customer awareness for their brands and to build strong, positive and unique brand associations in the minds of existing and future customers. In this respect, this study may help professional teams and brand managers to understand sources of the brand equity and how they affect the attributes such as logo, stadium, product distribution and tradition. In addition, stadiums should be modernized, their safety should be increased and the service quality provided in stadiums should be improved in order to increase and satisfy expectations of spectators. Considering the customer satisfaction, restructuring of tribunes, building luxury lodges, opening restaurants, sports bars and

shopping centres within stadium are considered as important steps in terms of perception guidance. It is thought that such areas will improve organizational culture, increase the number of loyal fans and provide additional income items to clubs.

This research presents a valid model for customer-based brand equity in football teams. It is thought that this model and the results of the research, including brand associations, brand awareness, perceived quality and fan loyalty will contribute to marketing research and brand management in sports teams, especially in football teams. In addition, it can be investigated in future research studies whether the proposed model is valid in basketball, volleyball, handball and other sports teams and whether the relationship between the dimensions of this model are different for these teams.

However, we have to be careful since there are some limitations to the interpretation of results. The first one is that the model established for this study was tested with only one sports club and a single group of fans. Although characteristics of the football team, discussed in this study, are considered as interesting in terms of brand equity (Atiker Konyaspor club: among the world's top 5 stadiums in the competition of "Best Stadiums of 2014", Ziraat Turkey Cup Champion in 2016-2017 season and Turkcell Super Cup Champion in 2017-2018 season), the relationships found out in this study are to be verified on the fans of other clubs and the brand equity and the fan loyalty of other teams would be tested. This will help the generalization of the model developed in this study. Another limitation is related to brand association types, the benefits (identity, nostalgia, pride, escape, acceptance of friends) and attitudes (importance, knowledge, effect) were ignored in this research. Inclusion of other types of brand associations may provide different perspectives on brand equity and fan loyalty. Another limitation is related to the fact that this study is a cross-sectional research. Professional football teams may not be trusted to follow changes in fan loyalty levels over time.

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