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LIKE, SHARE OR COMMENT 'TILL WE DIE: ANALYZING FOOTBALL FANS' ENGAGEMENTS, IDENTITY AND LOYALTY ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Polub, udostępnij lub skomentuj. Do ostatniego tchu: Analiza zaangażowania, tożsamości i lojalności fanów piłki nożnej w mediach społecznościowych

Streszczenie

Kluby piłkarskie coraz częściej dostrzegają znaczenie sieci społecznościowych jako kluczowych narzędzi komunikacji i interakcji z fanami, zarówno online, jak i offline. Celem niniejszego badania było opracowanie wszechstronnego modelu koncepcyjnego, który analizuje złożone wzajemne powiązania między zaangażowaniem fanów, tożsamością zespołu i lojalnością w kanałach mediów społecznościowych, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem piłki nożnej. Dane zostały zebrane za pomocą ankiety internetowej, w której wzięło udział 264 zapalonych fanów piłki nożnej związanych z trzema czołowymi klubami tureckiej superligi piłkarskiej. Pomiar zaangażowania w media społecznościowe obejmował trzy podwymiary: konsumpcję, wkład i tworzenie. Hipotezy przetestowano za pomocą eksploracyjnej analizy czynnikowej, potwierdzającej analizy czynnikowej i modelowania równań strukturalnych. Wyniki potwierdziły cztery z siedmiu hipotez, dostarczając dowodów na znaczące powiązania między badanymi konstruktami. Odkrycia ujawniły znaczące powiązania między zaangażowaniem fanów, identyfikacją i zachowaniami lojalnościowymi, takimi jak polubienie, udostępnianie i komentowanie na platformach społecznościowych. Wyniki tych badań

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niosą ze sobą wiele implikacji, oferujących istotne spostrzeżenia dla menedżerów piłkarskich i marketerów sportowych, którzy chcą zwiększyć zaangażowanie fanów poprzez wdrożenie zaawansowanych strategii w mediach społecznościowych. Co więcej, badanie to pogłębia naszą wiedzę na temat nawyków fanów w mediach społecznościowych, dostarczając cennego zasobu specjalistom ds. marketingu, którzy wykorzystują sieci społecznościowe w swoich strategiach marketingowych.

Słowa kluczowe: marketing sportowy; media społecznościowe; identyfikacja z zespołem; zaangażowanie fanów; lojalność fanów.

Abstract

Football clubs have increasingly recognized the importance of social media networks as crucial tools for communication and interaction with their fans, both online and offline. The purpose of this study was to develop an all-encompassing conceptual model that scrutinizes the complex interconnection among fan engagement, team identity, and loyalty on social media channels, with a particular focus on football. Data were collected via an online survey involving 264 avid football fans associated with three prominent clubs in the Turkish Football Super League. The measurement of social media engagement encompassed three sub-dimensions: consumption, contribution, and creation. Hypotheses were tested using exploratory factor analysis, confirmatory factor analysis, and structural equation modeling. The results confirmed four out of seven hypotheses, providing evidence of significant associations between the constructs under investigation. The findings revealed meaningful connections between fan engagement, identification, and loyalty behaviors, such as liking, sharing, and commenting on social media platforms. The findings of this research bear multiple implications that offer significant insights for football managers and sports marketers seeking to enhance fan involvement through the implementation of advanced social media strategies. Furthermore, this study enhances our understanding of social media habits among fans, providing a precious asset for marketing professionals who utilize social media networks in their marketing strategies.

Keywords: sports marketing; social media; team identification; fan engagement; fan loyalty.

Introduction

Football has emerged as a significantly consequential constituent of our society, engrossing an expansive proportion of the global populace, equating to 40%, thereby solidifying its stature as the preeminent sport worldwide (Nielsen Company, 2022). Over the past two decades, various changes within the realm of football have influenced the dynamics between clubs and their fans. In today's digital landscape, the internet and social media platforms have become indispensable tools for information retrieval, communication, and the exchange of opinions. Sports enthusiasts' daily experiences are significantly impacted by the prominent role social media plays, including widely used platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter. Among these social media platforms, Facebook emerges as a prominent locus for football-oriented interaction. It has attained paramount status as a preferred platform for global football afi-

cionados, attracting millions of users who actively participate in monthly discourse, disseminating their perspectives, images, and videos pertaining to teams, matches, and clubs (Statista, 2018). Football clubs can leverage social media to connect with their fans in more ways than one. Additionally, it also gives club management an opportunity to understand the motivations, loyalty, and relationships of their fan base through insights gained from social media. Effective media relations and personalized connections are essential for football club managers who seek to communicate effectively with their fans or consumers. Fans establish engaging relationships with their preferred teams or clubs through social media, both online and offline. Research on football enthusiasts, who are people that show an interest in and follow a specific team or players, accentuates the communal sentiments such as compassion, backing, affiliation, and companionship that exist among the fans and the team they endorse (Depken, 2001; Giulianotti, 2002; Tapp & Clowes, 2002).

Crucially, sports fans often share these experiences within tightly knit social groups connected through various social networks (Benigni et al., 2009). Although sports communication, team identification, and football fan loyalty have been widely researched, there has been a lack of academic focus on comprehending the social media content that is linked to football fan endorsement. Social media platforms offer diverse communication features, providing an extensive array of media options encompassing textual exchanges, messaging, and content streaming. Given the competitive nature of social media, the potential to cultivate fan engagement through these platforms is highly promising for sports executives (Stavros et al., 2013).

Football clubs have taken on the responsibility of being content creators, foregoing conventional media channels and mastering the art of connecting with their diverse international fan base or supporter network through social media. The evolution of social media has presented football clubs with significant opportunities to connect with fans. This study seeks to explore the typology of relationships between football clubs and their supporters within the context of social media platforms. The objective is to evaluate how social media can provide an advantageous space for conducting marketing strategies that create lasting value for sports clubs/companies as well as for sports fans/customers. Conceptualizing and measuring social media engagement, team identification, and fan loyalty within the sports management literature has garnered limited attention so far.

This study aims to investigate the significant impact of social media on sports clubs' marketing strategies, with a focus on its effects on brand image and fan engagement. The study aims to analyze the consequences of the broad acceptance of social media, particularly in devising plans that seek to promote deeper fan involvement and foster stronger relationships between football supporters and clubs.

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

Social Media Engagement

The term "social media engagement" has recently gained substantial attention. Consumer-generated media is a collective term for various online sources of information that consumers create and share any subject of interest with others. Social media platforms have emerged as potent tools for augmenting public communication and participation. Moreover, they have become an indispensable resource for consumer decision-making and crucial for establishing and nurturing brand-customer relationships (Pentina et al., 2018). Athletes, sports clubs, and sports fans actively use social media platforms to exchange information about ongoing sporting events. Players and clubs, in particular, maintain direct contact with their fans and supporters through such channels. Social media platforms facilitate user networking, relationship building, communication, and information exchange within networks of users or fans.

In recent years, social media has become a regular component of direct marketing strategies employed by sports teams and football clubs. In 2018, Facebook had a massive user base of 2.3 billion globally, making it a highly favored new media platform and a powerful tool for brand advertising (Statista, 2018). Sports clubs swiftly adopted Facebook as a communication channel with their fans, benefiting from the ease of generating new content during the season. Consequently, Facebook has proven to be an efficient and effective means, personally engaging fans and reinforcing their connection with the team. Consequently, establishing a connection with a team on Facebook is likely to be strongly associated with team identification. Brands have primarily focused on Facebook as a vital marketing channel to enhance consumer engagement and brand awareness (Malhotra, 2013; Rohm et al., 2013). According to Muntinga et al. (2011), entertainment has a significant role in stimulating consumption, contribution, and creation as dimensions of participation. Thus, this study investigates behaviors related to consumption, contribution, and creation, which commonly represent the phenomenon of engagement. It is anticipated that a relationship exists between social media engagement and its sub-dimensions of consumption, contribution, creation, and team identification.

Building upon the literature background and in pursuit of addressing the research questions, specific hypotheses are proposed:

H1a. The consumption sub-dimension of social media engagement is positively related to team identification.

H1b. The contributing sub-dimension of social media engagement is positively related to team identification.

H1c. The creation of a sub-dimension of social media engagement is positively related to team identification.

Consumption, Contribution and Creation

Social media platforms encompass interactive and digital technologies that facilitate the exchange of ideas, content creation, and individual or group interactions among users. Interaction on social media involves mutual sharing of experiences, ideas, information and impressions. Users actively engage with content through comments, likes and ratings, establishing social connections with one another. Serving as a communication and interaction medium, social media accommodates various forms of media, including images, audio, text, and/or video, regardless of the platform used.

Consumer online brand-related activities (COBRAs) is a theoretical framework that elucidates consumer behavioral engagement with brands on social media. Consumers engage in a variety of COBRAs related to brands, which range in terms of the level of consumer engagement with social media and involve the consumption, contribution, and generation of media content. Consumer COBRAs denote the minimum brand-related online activity, involving engagement with content without actively contributing or creating it. It is engaging in various activities such as viewing branded videos created by customers, companies or clubs, browsing through product or service evaluations and scores submitted by others, and taking part in discussions or feedback on online forums that are related to clubs. It also entails downloading and sharing pictures, text or videos (Muntinga et al., 2011).

Consumption represents the starting point of social media hierarchy and offers an opportunity for football fans and consumers to express their behavior on social media. It is the most prevalent engagement among fans and requires relatively less active involvement as individuals passively consume content. Therefore, fans can consume diverse content that aligns with their interests and provides entertainment. Consumption behavior on social media involves reading, watching, listening, or downloading digital content. Consumers' behavior can be less active or receptive when they only passively observe or use content. This is known as a lower level of interaction according to studies (Evans, 2010; Li & Bernoff, 2011; Muntinga et al., 2011).

Engaging in discussions related to the brand on social media platforms, leaving comments on brand-related content such as images, text, or videos, and providing ratings for products or brands on social media are all examples of contributing to a brand's online presence. Contribution involves active creation of content and represents the highest brand-related social media activity. Users actively generate and disseminate brand-centric content, which is subsequently consumed and contributed to by others (Muntinga et al., 2011).

Creation refers to the production of brand-related content by consumers themselves. This can take the form of creating online brand communities, blogs,

written texts, generated videos, and/or music (Evans, 2010; Muntinga et al., 2011). As this activity entails a significantly higher barrier and requires substantial consumer effort, it necessitates a greater level of consumer involvement (Evans, 2010). The motivation underlying this deep engagement is often a means for consumers to relax and escape from reality (Courtois et al., 2009). Content creation within social networks, such as videos (Li & Bernoff, 2011), can be a powerful tool for self-expression, ultimately leading to recognition by other users (Evans, 2010). Consumers who participate in the creation phase are known for being extremely active on social media and often take charge of their personal blogs (Li &Bernoff, 2011). As previously mentioned, contribution enables social interaction among consumers, whereas creation facilitates social participation (Evans, 2010).

Therefore, we present the following hypotheses based on the reasoning and justifications, which suggest that social media engagement has the potential to influence fan loyalty in terms of consumption, contribution, and creation.

H2a. The consumption sub-dimension of social media engagement is positively related to loyalty.

H2b. The contribution sub-dimension of social media engagement is positively related to loyalty.

H2c. The creation sub-dimension of social media engagement is positively related to loyalty.

Team Identification

Team identification refers to the extent of psychological attachment experienced by sports fans toward their preferred team (Kim & Kim, 2009; Wann & Dolan, 1994). It represents a collective construct of social success, reflecting the sense of belonging and emotional connection individuals have with their team. Fans with a powerful sense of team identity offer several benefits to sports organizations, including diminished price sensitivity and an inclination to participate in game attendance and team-related acquisitions (Wakefield & Wann, 2006). Notably, team identification possesses the ability to elicit emotional responses due to the heightened personal commitment it entails (Sutton et al., 1997). Relationships, commitment, and emotional involvement are commonly associated with the concept of identification in the sports domain (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

People's loyalty towards sports team usually arises from attributing functional, emotional, and symbolic importance to the team. The inclination to support a team is shaped by numerous aspects, including the team offering an outlet for escapism, their track record of triumphs, approval from peers, experiencing the success of others, reliving past glories, and shared affinity with the

team's key players (Funk & James, 2006). To create a strong bond with fans, sports managers must recognize and understand different factors that influence fans' identification with a team. When these factors are considered collectively, they shape fans' emotional connection and overall perception towards various aspects and events related to the team. Manageable aspects, such as personnel decisions and the quality of peripheral game experiences, can be leveraged to enhance team identification. The hypothesis suggesting that team identification can impact fan loyalty is expressed as follows:

H3. Team identification is positively related to fan loyalty.

Fan Loyalty

Football fans, also known as supporters, exhibit a distinct characteristic of being highly passionate about their respective clubs (Roose et al., 2010). According to the study by Norris et al. (2014), "a true football fan is someone who constantly thinks and talks about sports, even when they are not actively watching, reading, or listening to a sporting event. These fans demonstrate consistency, dedication, and loyalty through three primary forms of devotion." Fans show their passion for the sport and their beloved team by actively pursuing their loyalty through different activities such as buying tickets or team merchandise Stewart et al., 2003; Johnston, 2004).

The fervor and strong allegiance demonstrated by sports fans have fostered the conventional belief that they exhibit unwavering loyalty to their chosen sports clubs (Johnston, 2004). Fan engagement plays a crucial role in providing sports clubs with strategic advantage. It encompasses the interaction with the brand's personality, which drives individuals to actively consume club merchandise and avail themselves of the offered services (Capella, 2002). Regarding sports supporters or fans, their level of behavioral commitment can be evaluated by their attendance or viewership frequency throughout a season, participation in home or away games, possession of season tickets, or financial contribution towards following a particular team or sport (Matsuoka et al., 2003).

According to Kozinets (2002; 2012), online communities can socially reinforce consumption, leading to increased brand loyalty and usage. In the context of sports consumers, the behavioral component of loyalty encompasses factors such as the number of tickets purchased, product acquisitions, and television viewership. The attitudinal component examines consumer opinions and sentiments toward a team (Dietz-Uhler et al., 2000; Wann & Dolan, 1994; Johnston, 2004). The conceptual model developed on the basis of the aforementioned hypotheses will be empirically tested using the proposed framework.
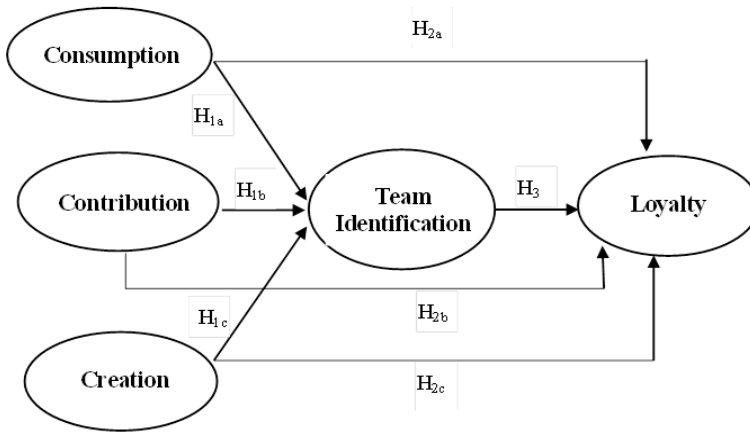
Figure 1
Conceptual Model

Methods

Participants

   The study sample comprised individuals identified as football enthusiasts re-siding in Eskişehir, situated within the Central Anatolia region of Turkey. Employ-ing a convenience sampling method, the investigation specifically targeted fans of the foremost professional football clubs in the country, namely Galatasaray, Beşiktaş, and Fenerbahçe. The selection of Eskişehir as the research site was predicated on its substantial repository of fans associated with major football teams across Turkey. All participants voluntarily participated in the study, and the final dataset encompassed 264 individuals who diligently completed the sur-vey. Data collection occurred between October 2018 and January 2019. Most participants were drawn from the fervent followers of one of the three preemi-nent clubs competing in the Turkish Football Super League. The mean age of the sample was 24.97 years, wherein males accounted for 75.8% of the participants, the majority of whom were unmarried (83.8%). The results showed that a vast majority of the respondents, about 71%, were enrolled in universities. Around 13% were working as civil servants, and approximately 6% were employed in either public or private sectors. The mean age of the participants was 24.97 years (SD = 9.12), and the age range is from 16 to 67 years old. An impressive 84.5% of the participants were pursuing or had achieved a university-level edu-cation, while 8.3% had already obtained a master's or doctoral degree. Only a small percentage of 5.7% had limited their education to high school, while a mere 1.5% had attained qualifications below secondary school level. In rela-

tion to the mean monthly earnings, 41.7% of participants disclosed a monthly household income below $350, while 33.3% delineated a monthly household income ranging from $351 to $700, and 25% reported incomes surpassing $701 per month. In this study, participants were requested to identify their preferred sports team and assess the team based on fan identification inquiries. Ultimately, the distribution of fan loyalty among the contenders was as follows: the fanbase distribution among team participants is lead by Galatasaray (42%), followed by Fenerbahçe (34.8%) and Beşiktaş (23.2%) at the team level. It is important to mention that utilizing the above-mentioned football clubs as examples may come with certain limitations. These constraints will be further discussed in the following section that delves into the study's limitations.

Measures

Social media engagement was assessed using a 7-point Likert scale comprising 12 items that encompassed three sub-dimensions: consumption, contribution, and creation. The measurement items for social media fan engagement were adapted from established sources; specifically previous research studies (Muntinga et al., 2011; Schivinski et al., 2016; Vale & Fernandes, 2018). Similarly, the items gauging team identification were derived from measures employed in prior scholarly investigations (Dalakas & Melancon, 2012; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003). According to these studies, fan or team loyalty is characterized by the strong inclination of supporters to display unwavering devotion and commitment towards their favored football club. To measure this concept, we utilized a loyalty scale composed of five items, similarly to previous studies (Tsiotsou, 2013; Yoshida et al., 2013; Zeithaml et al., 1996). Our objective was to assess the probability of supporters continuing to show loyalty towards their team.

Results

Measurement Model and Structural Model

In the initial stage, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to establish the validity and reliability of the scale items based on their respective structures within the scope of this research. Subsequently, structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed to analyze the collected data (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988; Tsiotsou, 2013; Yoshida et al., 2013). Furthermore, the data underwent a test to ensure that it met the essential assumptions required for exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using SPSS software to identify the factors associated with social media engagement, fan identification, and loyalty. The univariate normality of the observed variables was assessed using Skewness and Kurtosis, both of which fell within the acceptable range (< 2).

In addition, the three scales were separately analyzed using the maximum likelihood method of estimation and the varimax rotation. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test values were determined as 0.904 for social media engagement, 0.870 for team identification and 0.642 for loyalty. All Bartlett's Tests of Sphericity were statistically significant (X2 = 1961.476, df = 28; X2 = 1839.628, df = 10; X2 = 198.502, df = 3, respectively) at a significance level of p < .01. The three factors identified for social media engagement (consumption, contribution, and creation) explained 84.2 percent of the total variance, while team identification and loyalty were represented as unidimensional constructs, explaining 71.2 percent and 66.4 percent of the variance, respectively.

After conducting the EFAs, the measurement validity of each structure in the structural model was evaluated using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Hypothesis testing was performed using a structural equation model with LISREL 8.80 (Tsiotsou, 2013; Joreskog & Sorbom, 2006). CFAs were conducted for three scales: social media engagement, team identification, and loyalty. In evaluating the model fit, apart from chi-square value, six different goodness-of-fit indices were employed. Table 1 provides detailed information about these indices. Initially, CFA was applied to the three-dimensional social media engagement scale employed in this study. The overall model fit indices ($\chi2$ = 52.11, df = 17, p < 0.01, X2/df = 3.06, CFI = 0.99, GFI = 0.95, AGFI = 0.90, NFI = 0.99, IFI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.08, SRMR = 0.02) indicated that the proposed model exhibited an excellent fit.

Table 1
Model fit index values of confirmatory factor analysis

Index	Good fit	Rationale
X^2/df	0 ≤ X2/df ≤ 5	Wheaton et al. (1977)
RMSEA	0 ≤ RMSEA ≤ 0.08	Steiger (2007)
SRMR	0 ≤ SRMR ≤ 0.08	Hu and Bentler (1999)
CFI	0.90 ≤ CFI ≤ 1.00	Steiger (2007)
GFI	0.90 ≤ GFI ≤ 1.00	Hooper et al. (2008)
AGFI	0.90 ≤ AGFI ≤ 1.00	Hooper et al. (2008)
IFI	0.90 ≤ IFI ≤ 1.00	Steiger (2007)
NFI	0.90 ≤ IFI ≤ 1.00	Hu and Bentler (1999)

With respect to the team identification scale, the fit statistics demonstrated that the measurement model exhibited a favorable fit to the data. The ratio of the chi-square ($\chi2$) value to the degrees of freedom (df) ($\chi2$ = 12.84, df = 5, p < 0.05, X2/d = 2.57) and the goodness-of-fit indices (CFI = 0.99, GFI = 0.98, AGFI = 0.94, NFI = 0.99, IFI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.07, SRMR = 0.02) fell within the

recommended cutoff ranges established by Steiger (2007). Regarding the CFA analysis conducted on loyalty, the overall fit of the structural model to the data was deemed excellent ($\chi 2$ = 0.00, df = 0, p < 1.00, CFI = 1.00, GFI = 1.00, AGFI = 1.00, NFI = 1.00, IFI = 1.00, RMSEA = 0.00, SRMR = 0.00). The factor loading of the dimensions of social media engagement, team identification, and loyalty can be found in Table 2.

Table 2
Factor loading of items and sub dimensions and items

	Std. Loads	t
Consumption		
CONS1	.96	20.94
CONS2	.94	20.30
CONS3	.95	20.50
Contribution		
CONT1	.90	18.84
CONT2	.94	20.41
CONT3	.92	19.52
Creation		
CREA1	.94	20.21
CREA2	.92	19.49
Team Identification		
TEID1	.66	11.89
TEID2	.82	15.97
TEID3	.88	18.02
TEID4	.95	20.61
TEID5	.90	18.61
Loyalty		
LOYA1	.93	16.07
LOYA2	.75	12.71
LOYA3	.64	10.71

The present study included an analysis of correlations, internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha), composite reliability (CR), convergent validity, construct validity, and discriminant validity for the measurement model. The outcomes of these analyses are presented in Table 2. The composite reliability (CR) scores and Cronbach's alpha values demonstrated excellent consistency, surpassing the recommended threshold (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994; Peterson & Kim, 2013). Furthermore, the factor loading within the scales exceeded the recommended 0.5.

Convergent validity of the scales was assessed using the criteria proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981). First, the related items should load significantly on the underlying construct. In this regard, the items within each scale exhibited high loading (t-values ranging from 10.71 to 20.94), providing robust evidence of convergent validity (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). As displayed in Table 3, the whole loading on the hypothesized constructs was statistically significant and surpassed the threshold of .64. Second, the average variance extracted (AVE) values exceeded .61 (≥ .50) for all constructs, further supporting the convergent validity of our survey instruments Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Additionally, the AVEs, the square root of AVEs, and the correlation coefficients were all statistically significant, signifying the presence of discriminant validity.

To evaluate construct validity, Pearson's correlation coefficients were calculated among constructs (ranging from 0.58 to .86, $p < .01$) and with other questionnaires measuring related constructs. Moreover, all dimensions within the scales exhibited favorable internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 0.75 and composite reliability (CR) surpassing .70 (Hair et al., 2006). Overall, the results of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) indicate satisfactory validity and reliability for all constructs (refer to Table 3).

Table 3
Reliability and validity of the measurement model

Construct	Alpha	AVE	CR	Correlations of constructs				
				(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)
CONSU (a)	.94	.90	.97	(.95)				
CONTR (b)	.91	.85	.94	.58**	(.92)			
CREAT (c)	.90	.87	.93	.56**	.86**	(.93)		
TEAMI (d)	.75	.72	.93	.72**	.61**	.61**	(.84)	
LOYAL (e)	.90	.61	.82	.70**	.59**	.58**	.70**	(.78)

* < 0.05; ** < 0.01
Note: "CONSU: Consumption.", "CONTR: Contribution.", "CREAT: Creation.", "TEAMI: Team Identification.", "LOYAL: Loyalty.", "AVE: Average Variance Extracted.", "CR: Composite Reliability.", "Alpha: Cronbach's Alpha.", Diagonal elements in the "correlation of constructs" matrix are the square root of AVE.

After validating the measurements, a structural equation model was employed to test the research hypotheses, as depicted in Figure 1. Data analyses revealed that several values in the model exhibited acceptable goodness-of-fit indicators. The overall fit of the structural model to the data was deemed satisfactory (χ^2 = 348.25, df = 94, $p < 0.01$, X2/d = 3.70, CFI = 0.98, GFI = 0.86, AGFI = 0.79, NFI = 0.97, IFI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.09, SRMR = 0.04).

As evident from Table 4, the results provided support many hypothesized relationships except for H1b, H2b, and H2c. Concerning the relationship between social media engagement and team identification, except the association between contribution and team identification (β = -.25, p > .05), the remaining two relationships were found to be statistically significant. Regarding the association between social media engagement and loyalty, the consumption sub-dimension displayed a positive correlation with loyalty (β = .40, p < .5), thus supporting H2a. As anticipated, the findings of this study indicated that team identification is significantly linked to fan loyalty (β = .37, p < .05), thereby supporting H3. Overall, hypotheses H1a, H1c, H2a, and H3 as stated in the conclusion of the analysis were accepted, while H1b, H2b, and H2c were rejected.

Table 4
Results of relationship analysis

	Std Beta	t	Hypothesis Results
Consumption → Team identification (H_{1a})	.66	8.50*	Accepted
Contribution → Team identification (H_{1b})	-.25	-1.29	Rejected
Creation → Team identification (H_{1c})	.49	2.53*	Accepted
Consumption → Loyalty (H_{2a})	.40	4.69*	Accepted
Contribution → Loyalty (H_{2b})	.08	.39	Rejected
Creation → Loyalty (H_{2c})	.12	.60	Rejected
Team identification → Loyalty (H_3)	.37	4.08*	Accepted

* $p < 0.05$

Discussion

In the contemporary era, the widespread use of the internet and social media has resulted in a profound transformation of individuals' information-seeking behaviors, communication patterns, and review-related activities. Users have transitioned from passive consumers to active "prosumers," who fulfill both producer and consumer roles. This shift in user behavior carries significant implications not only for individuals but also for companies and sports clubs who aim to engage with their target audience or fans. Social media platforms have emerged as crucial channels for interaction, as users actively exchange topics of interest within online communities and place greater trust in recommendations from friends and unknown third parties on these platforms compared to company-generated content (Li et al., 2023).

Historically, television and print advertising played a central role in sports clubs' marketing strategies, enabling them to reach a wide audience. However,

these traditional channels now play a minor role, while social media has taken center stage in modern advertising, fundamentally altering how sports clubs connect with their fans. Effectively harnessing social media has become imperative for clubs to gain and maintain a competitive advantage (Chung & Gibler, 2019). The capacity of social media to shape brand perception among fans and exert influence on their level of commitment holds significant prominence. Clubs that strategically prioritize social media in their marketing approaches gain an edge over their competitors (Niu & Zhang, 2021). A comprehensive review of existing literature on social media usage and its impact on brand perception can contribute to the development of successful strategies for enhancing fan engagement (Divargedal, 2021). To cultivate enduring associations with fans, sports organizations must prioritize proficient communication and interaction. Social media platforms have become ideal tools for facilitating ongoing two-way dialogues, allowing clubs to engage in meaningful conversations with their fans (Dimitrovski et al., 2019). Prominent social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube have seamlessly integrated into the daily lives of millions of people, revolutionizing communication patterns and interpersonal connections (Niu & Zhang, 2021). As a result, football clubs have adapted their management approaches by actively participating in conversations with fans on club-owned social media platforms while disseminating information (Filo et al., 2015). The continually increasing number of monthly active users on Facebook serves as evidence of the growing prominence of social media (Statista, 2018). This trend underscores the immense potential of social media platforms as communication channels for sports clubs to effectively engage with their target audience, offering personalized and interactive experiences that foster fan loyalty (Thackeray et al., 2013).

Our research findings align with several previous studies. First, the dimensions of fan engagement we presented in this study – consumption, contribution, and creation – are consistent with those obtained in the literature. We confirmed the validity and reliability of these dimensions which were previously identified by Vale and Fernandes (2018). Similarly, in the research conducted by Annamalai et al. (2021), these three dimensions, namely "like", "comment" and "share" were key elements of interest. When these dimensions are examined from a functional point of view, their similarities with the dimensions related to fan participation become clear. Second, there are several studies in the literature supporting relationships in our conceptual model. According to the study of Yoshida et al. (2014), a positive and significant relationship was found between fan loyalty and intention as fan behavior. This confirms the effect of fan loyalty on brand purchase intention, which is closely related to loyalty in the sports marketing literature (Pradhan et al., 2019). Moreover, team identification, as an antecedent, has an indirect effect on intention (Yoshida et al., 2014).

Previous studies (Yun et al., 2021; Prentice et al., 2018) have also revealed direct or indirect relationships between consumer/fan engagement and loyalty. Therefore, our study supports existing literature and shares similarities with the results of these studies.

In conclusion, the contemporary digital landscape, characterized by the widespread use of the internet and social media, has led to fundamental changes in the ways individuals seek information, communicate, and engage with content. For sports clubs, the effective utilization of social media platforms is pivotal to their marketing strategies, enabling them to shape brand perception, influence fan commitment, and enhance fan engagement. By conducting a thorough review of existing research on social media usage and brand perception, sports clubs can develop novel and successful strategies to cultivate long-term value for their customers or fans (Niu& Zhang, 2021). Consequently, understanding the potential of social media engagement as a marketing field of action is crucial for companies, sports clubs, and their fans.

Conclusion

Social networks have been increasingly used by sports clubs and sports organizations to establish relationships with the public. Social media has been increasingly used by sports organizations to communicate with consumers (Pedersen & Thibault, 2014). Social media are contributing to the digitization of fans and connection to their clubs. Social media benefit clubs, fans, and players by allowing them to reinforce their message, discuss, interact with fans, and continually listen to what they have to say. It also allows them to reach a wider audience, which can be national or international. Social media serves as a conduit for facilitating the dynamic interaction between football clubs and their fan base, functioning as a pivotal media platform for gauging and influencing the extent of audience engagement. Social media also has given clubs the tools to fiercely compete with traditional media and have their own channels to reach their fans and supporters: fast, direct, without different versions or comments, anytime and anywhere. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, to name the most common, are the voices of the new generation who use the internet as a source of information.

In the last decades, changes in the consumption habits of fans have also directly affected football clubs. This study is concerned with the question of how clubs can use social media as a tool for fan relations management and what rules should be followed in such an engagement. In the sports marketing field, social media and fan engagement has long been one of the most intensely discussed topics. The reason for this lies in the fact that compared to material goods, ser-

vices are primarily characterized by the constitutive characteristic of fan involvement, which is why the creation of most services is inevitably associated with a certain form of fan engagement.

In this respect, it is also one of the central strategic and operational tasks of club management to determine the type and extent of fan involvement. This form of social media and fan engagement also results in specific challenges for many different club management tasks such as incomes or fan retention. When the sports management literature is examined, limited attention has been devoted to social media engagement, fan identification and fan loyalty, particularly in the context of social media. In this respect, our study provided significant contributions, both methodological and practical, to the fields of football, social media engagement, fan identification and loyalty. In this study, we try to identify the drivers of engagement and loyalty with football clubs on Facebook from a football fan perspective. The fact is that the dimensions titled as "consumption" and "creation" of the social media engagement scale demonstrate a significant effect on team identification. Considering the predictors of fan loyalty, findings of this study indicate that football team managers should invest and prioritize several factors including engagement in social media and team identification. We found the consuming factor of social media engagement to be the only influential antecedent among the three antecedents of loyalty. In other words, contributing and creating had no significant effect on loyalty.

The dynamic landscape of the internet and social media has revolutionized the way information is disseminated, communication occurs, and consumer behavior unfolds. For sports clubs, effectively using social media platforms as integral components of their marketing strategies is vital for remaining competitive in an increasingly digital world. By harnessing the power of social media, clubs can shape brand perceptions, influence fan commitment, and foster long-term fan engagement (Vale & Fernandes, 2018). Future research should continue to explore the diverse ways in which social media engagement can generate value for sports clubs and their fans, ultimately contributing to the development of innovative marketing strategies in the sports industry.

The findings of this study yield substantial theoretical and managerial contributions, offering an enhanced perspective to comprehensively understand the intricate associations between fan engagement in social media, team identification, and loyalty. Consistent with prior research, the study further substantiates the vital role of engagement and team identification in fostering fan loyalty. Notably, the results strongly imply that individuals exhibiting heightened team identification are significantly more inclined to demonstrate unwavering loyalty toward their respective teams (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; Benigni et al., 2009; Depken, 2001; Giulianotti, 2002; Nicholson et al., 2015; Norris et al., 2014; Pentina et al., 2018).

In conclusion, the internet and social media have profoundly reshaped information dissemination, communication patterns, and consumer behavior. For sports clubs, integrating social media into their marketing strategies is vital for staying competitive in the digital age. Leveraging these platforms empowers clubs to shape brand perceptions, influence fan commitment, and ultimately enhance fan engagement. Therefore, an in-depth analysis of social media engagement as a marketing tool is necessary to create long-term value for companies, sports clubs, and their customers or fans, as evidenced by previous research (Divargedal, 2021; Niu & Zhang, 2021). This study finding was very interesting and confirms that football fans, one of the biggest consumer masses in Turkey, can be unique in certain respects when compared to other service industries or consumption contexts.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The results of this study bear significant theoretical and practical implications, making notable contributions to the domains of sports marketing, fan behavior, and identification literature. Primarily, this study enriches the existing literature by validating and establishing the reliability of fan engagement dimensions. Furthermore, it contributes by elucidating the intricate relationship between the engagement phenomenon and team identification, while examining their combined influence on fan loyalty. In doing so, this study enhances the depth of knowledge in the field by unveiling the effects and interrelationships among these dimensions, aligning with existing literature on customer or fan engagement (Yun et al., 2021; Prentice et al., 2018). Notably, this research highlights the positive impact of fan engagement on loyalty, as evidenced by consumer behavior, thereby empirically supporting the use of team identification to bolster fan loyalty within the context of engagement.

The advent of social networks and the digital environment has provided a platform for fans to challenge traditional norms and break down barriers associated with fandom. It is important to acknowledge that social media plays a pivotal role in shaping individuals' associations and perceptions (Chadwick et al., 2021). The practical implications of this study are of particular relevance to sports marketers and football club managers. Moreover, the findings hold paramount significance for sports marketers and promotional managers as they can utilize this knowledge to devise novel marketing strategies and bolster loyalty campaigns. From a football club management perspective, the presence of engaged fans enhances loyalty to various products, such as licensed merchandise and home and away games, by fostering an emotional bond between the football team and its fans as well as among the fans themselves. These social inter-

actions among fans and their alignment with the football team as a brand serve as crucial indicators of team loyalty.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has contributed valuable theoretical and methodological insights, offering intriguing knowledge to the field. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the exploratory nature of the study in examining the relationship between social media engagement, fan identification, and loyalty, as well as its inherent limitations. First, this study employed a small sample size comprising solely fans from three major football teams within a single mid-sized city in Turkey. Consequently, employing a larger and more diverse sample encompassing fans from various countries would facilitate a more generalized statistical analysis. Thus, further research using representative samples from the general population is warranted.

Secondly, it is essential to recognize that the findings and implications (both theoretical and practical) of this study pertain specifically to the context of football. Therefore, caution must be exercised when attempting to generalize these results to other sports contexts such as basketball and volleyball. Third, a limitation exists about the focus on team sports fans in this study. Future research should endeavor to investigate the role of fan engagement behavior in individual sports such as tennis, athletics, and gymnastics. Exploring these domains would enrich our understanding of the phenomenon.

Lastly, additional limitation pertains to the construct framework employed in this study. To bridge this research gap, future investigations and model development should incorporate factors such as team involvement, fan satisfaction, and word-of-mouth communication. The integration of these constructs would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research domain. Therefore, we strongly encourage further research on social media engagement, team identification, and loyalty not only within the context of football but also across various other sports, aiming to enhance our knowledge in this area.

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