

Investigating the role of fan club membership on perceptions of team brand equity in football



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ABSTRACT

Researchers have suggested that brand equity is vital for professional sport teams by focusing on the examination of sport fans in general. The current study aims to examine the differences in team brand equity perceptions between fan club members and non-members, and the predictive role of brand equity dimensions on behavioral intentions. Data were collected from fans of a professional football league ($n = 2287$) with an adapted version of the spectator-based brand equity scale. The results gathered through a confirmatory factor analysis provide evidence of fair psychometric properties of the measurement scale. A multi-group CFA analysis showed factorial stability of the model in both groups, while the latent mean comparisons revealed significant differences in the dimensions of brand mark, social interaction, commitment, team history, organizational attributes, team success, head coach, management, stadium, and internalization. In addition, a multi-group SEM analysis revealed that the relationships between brand equity dimensions and behavioral intentions are not significantly different among the groups. Social interaction, team success and internalization were the significant positive predictors of behavioral intentions among the overall sample. These findings highlight the importance of studying different types of consumers and suggest managerial implications, such as the need for clubs to establish reciprocal relationships with fans in order to increase their levels of internalization and contribute to increased behavioral intentions.

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1. Introduction

There has been a steady stream of research suggesting that managing brand equity is of vital importance for professional sport teams in order to generate long-term benefits (Bauer, Sauer, & Schmitt, 2005; Ross, 2006; Teed, Delpy-Neirotti, Johnson, & Séguin, 2009). Sport teams have the potential to build brand equity by capitalizing on the psychological relationship shared with fans (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005). This is particularly evident among European football (i.e., soccer) teams, given that attending football matches is a very popular leisure activity among European sport fans (Koenigstorfer, Groeppel-Klein, & Schmitt, 2010; Theodorakis, Alexandris, Tsigilis, & Karvounis, 2013), and attendees experience a wide range of emotions at the stadiums that contribute to their perceptions of the team (Biscaia, Correia, Rosado, Marôco, & Ross, 2012; Sumino & Harada, 2004).

Brand equity is often suggested as a multi-dimensional concept (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993) that is environmentally sensitive (Yoo & Donthu, 2002), and varies across different contexts (Bauer et al., 2005; Gladden & Funk, 2001; Ross, Russell, & Bang, 2008). Heere et al. (2011) posit that sport teams are symbolic representations of their surroundings, which suggests that the specific features of each sport should be considered to better understand the importance of brand equity for sport clubs (Biscaia, Correia, Ross, Rosado, & Marôco, 2013). Previous studies have focused on assessing consumers' brand perceptions of sport organizations in general (e.g., Bauer, Stokburger-Sauer, & Exler, 2008; Ferrand, Robinson, & Valette-Florence, 2010; Ross et al., 2008), yet no empirical studies have examined how brand equity dimensions vary among different types of consumers of the clubs. Garbarino and Johnson (1999) differentiate customers of an organization based on their contractual relations that reflect differences in relational exchange behaviors. Consistent with this view, nowadays European football clubs have a fan base that consists of both paid members and casual customers. Paid members (i.e., fan club members) typically pay a monthly or annual fee in order to receive benefits that are not available for casual customers, such as discounts on club products and services, and restricted information about club-related activities (Sport Lisboa e Benfica, 2013). While paid members have a paramount role due to their emotional attachment, regular consumption and overall team-related expenditures (McDonald & Shaw, 2005), casual customers' consumption behaviors are more unstable and easily affected by other attractive leisure activities.

The exclusive focus on an overall population may limit the theoretical understanding and managerial implications of fans' perceptions of their team's brand equity. Furthermore, fans' perceptions of brand equity have often been linked to positive behavioral intentions (Vogel, Evanschitzky, & Ramaseshan, 2008; Yoshida & Gordon, 2012), but there is a lack of knowledge on how each dimension of the brand equity construct impacts fans' behavioral intentions. In order to fill this void, it is important to understand whether paid members differ from non-members regarding the perceptions of team brand equity, and to verify the predictive role of brand equity dimensions in both groups. In this sense, the purpose of this study is to compare team brand equity perceptions among paid members and non-members, and subsequently, to verify the predictive validity of the brand equity dimensions. From a practical standpoint, it is expected that knowledge derived from this study will aid sport managers involved in football environments to properly manage the team brand and foster strong long-term relationships with fans based on brand equity dimensions. Specifically, a greater understanding of how sport brands are perceived by fan club members and non-members will enable the organization to better deliver sport experiences in order to strengthen the link with fans with different relational exchange behaviors.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Fan club membership

A central idea in relationship marketing theories is the existence of a continuum of customer relationships, ranging from transactional to relational oriented (Gravald & Grönroos, 1996; Magnusen, Kim, & Kim, 2011). In line with this view, Garbarino and Johnson (1999) suggest that an organization can have both low and high relational customers. Low relational customers are viewed as individual ticket buyers and occasional subscribers of a service provided by the organization, while high relational customers refer to consistent subscribers (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999). This idea is particularly important in the sport scenario given that clubs have occasional customers of match tickets and other team-related products and services, as well as customers who pay a regular fee (i.e., fan club members) to have privileges related to the club and its products and services. That is, sport clubs provide access to membership programs that create a different type of link with a fan than a single consumer-club interaction (McDonald & Shaw, 2005).

Fan club membership programs are becoming pivotal for sport clubs as this strategy generates a stable source of revenue (Biscaia, Correia, Menezes, Rosado, & Colaço, 2012; McDonald & Shaw, 2005). In line with this view, professional sport clubs are increasingly becoming examples of membership-based organizations (McDonald & Stravos, 2007), and several European football clubs provide good illustrations of this important strategy. For example, both FC Barcelona (Spain) and Manchester United FC (England) have more than 200,000 paid members, while FC Bayern Munich (Germany) exceeded 150,000 paid members in 2012 (Futebol Marketing, 2012). A typical example of a fan club membership program would include season ticket packages varying in price, game access, or seat location (McDonald, Karg, & Vocino, 2013). However, it is important to note that fan club members are different than season ticket holders. A season ticket holder purchases a package to have access to all or almost all team games at the stadium for a reasonable price, but he/she does not necessarily need to engage in a membership program. Fan club members, on the other hand, pay a regular fee to have a wide range of benefits related to the

team and other club goods and services that surpass the simple possession of a season ticket. Membership programs can include priority and discounts when buying season tickets or single tickets, reserved seating, magazine subscriptions, social functions, and even voting rights for board elections (Shaw & McDonald, 2006; Yoshida & Gordon, 2012). From the club's perspective, obtaining a high number of paid members is necessary for funding core activities, daily operations, and attracting the investment of sponsoring brands (McDonald & Stravos, 2007). Another important benefit to the organization is that when fans engage in a membership program, their personal contact information is included in the club's database. This allows for strategies to be developed by the organization to strengthen the link between the team and fan through such methods as direct marketing and targeted promotions.

Previous studies focusing on paid members and casual customers of the same organization have suggested that members are different in their evaluations of the services (Bhattacharya, 1998; McDonald & Shaw, 2005). In the sport management literature, it has been suggested that fan club members and/or season ticket holders tend to have a stronger identification with the team than the supporters without membership (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998; Lock, Taylor, Funk, & Darcy, 2012), indicating that the greater a fan identifies with a team, the greater his/her perception of brand equity (Ross et al., 2008; Ross, Walsh, & Maxwell, 2009; Underwood, Bond, & Baer, 2001). This suggests that the more an individual feels connected to a team, the greater value of the team to that person (Boyle & Magnusson, 2007) and the stronger willingness to engage in future behaviors (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998). Additionally, existing studies have highlighted the important role of season ticket holders and fan club members, given that they tend to pay in advance before the beginning of the season (McDonald, 2010). Thus, these customers provide an important source for funding core activities of the club and aid in attracting subsidiary funding through sponsorships (McDonald & Stravos, 2007). In this sense, assessing the differences between fan club members and non-members in perceptions of brand equity, and the influence of brand equity dimensions on behavioral intentions between both groups, may prove to be essential for clubs when designing marketing strategies to strengthen weak associations and properly communicate with different types of consumers.

2.2. Sport brand equity

Brand equity refers to “the incremental utility or value added to a product by its brand name” (Yoo, Donthu, & Lee, 2000, p. 195). The measurement of brand equity is a key topic in branding research, with the conceptual frameworks proposed by Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993) representing the major theoretical bases for developing brand equity models in different industries (e.g., Kayaman & Arasli, 2007; Pappu, Quester, & Cooksey, 2005; Yoo & Donthu, 2002). Aaker (1991) conceptualizes brand equity as a combination of brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, brand loyalty, and brand assets. Drawing on Aaker's (1991) model, Keller (1993) introduced the concept of customer-based brand equity (CBBE) consisting of two components: brand awareness and brand image. The CBBE model highlights customer knowledge as the central driver for creating brand equity, and this approach has been suggested to provide useful insight on how sport managers can at least partially control spectators' mental associations towards their teams (Bauer et al., 2008; Gladden & Funk, 2002).

In the sport setting, brand equity has been described as the value consumers attach to the name and symbol of their favorite team (Gladden & Milne, 1999). The idea of managing a team as a brand has become a dominant paradigm in the sport marketplace (Doyle, Filo, McDonald, & Funk, 2013; Gladden & Funk, 2002). Several researchers have developed scales to measure brand equity over the last decade in a variety of sport settings (Bauer et al., 2005; Biscaia et al., 2013; Gladden & Funk, 2001; Ross et al., 2008). However, most studies have simply developed scales based on the theoretical foundations proposed by Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993), and did not consider spectators' experiences with their favorite teams (e.g., Bauer et al., 2005; Gladden, Milne, & Sutton, 1998; Gladden & Milne, 1999; Marticotte & Carrier, 2009). Failing to include spectator experience in the conceptualization and operationalization of sport brand equity represents a potential limitation to fully understand the brand equity construct in the spectator sport setting (Ross, 2006). Keeping in mind that the primary offering of the teams is an experiential product (i.e., the sporting event), Ross (2006) focused on spectator experience when developing the Spectator-Based Brand Equity (SBBE) model. The theoretical framework composed of brand associations and brand awareness was empirically tested by Ross and colleagues' subsequent study (2008) showing that the proposed model was a reliable tool to measure brand equity in professional sport teams. More recently, the SBBE model was further refined in the football industry by Biscaia et al. (2013) by considering brand associations as a second-order construct and internalization as a single first-order construct. The dimensions of brand associations are represented by the subscales of Brand Mark, Concessions, Social Interaction, Commitment, Team History, Organizational Attributes, Team Success, Head Coach, Management, and Stadium. The Internalization component refers to the extent to which an individual has incorporated the team into their personal identity (Ross et al., 2008), and is particularly relevant when examining differential effects of fan club members and causal supporters. That is, characteristics of internalization are very often observable within loyal customers (i.e., fan club members), while evidence of internalization is more limited among those causal supporters. The model proposed by Biscaia et al. (2013) showed evidence of fair psychometric properties and predictive efficacy on outcomes such as overall satisfaction and behavioral intentions, thus contributing to the continued understanding of brand equity in professional football. However, the authors did not examine how different customer groups vary in terms of their brand evaluations, in spite of the fact that previous studies suggest that spectators with a stronger attachment to the teams tend to have better perceptions of brand equity (Boyle & Magnusson, 2007; Ross et al., 2008). Additionally, the predictive role of each brand equity dimension was not examined by Biscaia et al. (2013) even though unraveling the specific brand elements that

drive the costumers' behaviors is paramount to increase brand health (Reynolds & Phillips, 2005). The questions of whether fan club members differ from non-members regarding the perception of brand equity and how each unique dimension of the brand equity construct affects fans' future outcomes remain answered. In order to improve an organization's ability to deliver satisfying and high quality experiences while increasing the number of paid members in the football clubs, a more in-depth examination of these relationships is warranted. Accordingly, this study was designed to examine the differences in brand equity perceptions between fan club members and non-members, and the predictive role of brand equity dimensions in both groups. Based on previous studies, it is expected that fan club members will rank the team brand dimensions higher and exhibit higher behavioral intentions due to their stronger attachment with the team and regular interactions (McDonald & Shaw, 2005).

3. Method

3.1. Research setting

The current study was conducted in the setting of the top Portuguese football league, which was ranked as the seventh best league in the world in 2013 by the International Federation of Football History and Statistics (ZeroZero, 2013). The top Portuguese football league consists of sixteen teams, and during the 2013/2014 season approximately 2.5 million spectators attended the league matches, with the average home attendance of the top team being over 40,000 spectators per game (LPFP, 2014). Membership programs represent an important strategy used by the Portuguese clubs to create a bond with supporters, which is clearly evident by the fact that two of the top five clubs in the world with the largest base of paid members are Portuguese clubs (Futebol Marketing, 2012). Further evidence of members' importance for the Portuguese clubs is provided by the benefits associated with the membership programs. For example, the Portuguese club with the largest base of paying members offers a club magazine to members, a guided tour to the stadium every season, special seating near the field, and priority when buying tickets for away games. Membership programs also provide pricing discounts on licensed products available in club megastores, products and services of some club sponsors, as well as tickets for other sport teams of the club (e.g., basketball, volleyball). In addition, fan club members have voting rights for board elections and administrative issues (Sport Lisboa e Benfica, 2013), creating a sense of ownership and connection with the club.

3.2. Data collection and sample

Data for this study were collected through an online survey placed on the most visited sports website in Portugal (A Bola, 2014). With the support of the website manager, a banner was activated on the website explaining the purposes of the study and inviting visitors to access a survey link about their favorite team. The IP address was recorded and further access from these IP addresses was denied after the survey submission in order to avoid repeat participants. The survey was available online for five non-consecutive days with a total of 3652 visitors accessing the survey link. The data were examined and responses from individuals less than 18 years, surveys not fully completed, surveys from respondents that had not attended their favorite team's home game in the current season, and those containing 10 or more consecutive answers on the same scale number were excluded from further analysis. After these data screening procedures, 2287 surveys were deemed usable for data analysis for an effective response rate of 62.6%. Although using an online survey was based on the benefits of higher response rates, reduced overall costs, and improved design capabilities (Bech & Kristensen, 2009), it is important to note that this type of survey may limit the representativeness of the sample. The final sample included fans of all 16 teams in the league, and almost all respondents were males (97.5%). Ages of the respondents ranged from 18 to 75 years ($M = 26.47$), with the greatest majority (72.9%) being less than 30 years old. More than half of the participants (53.0%) had a college or post-graduate degree. Almost half (49.3%) reported going to the stadium in the company of two or three other persons. More than one-third (38.8%) were fan club members of their favorite team, yet less than one-fifth (19.0%) were season ticket holders (see Appendix A for detailed information about sample characteristics).

3.3. Measures

The online survey included items used to assess brand equity and behavioral intentions, alongside the above-mentioned sociodemographic questions. Brand equity was assessed using the 33-item scale proposed by Biscaia et al. (2013) and includes brand associations and internalization measures. The use of this scale was due to the fact that it was developed in the football context and has previously showed adequate construct validity. Brand associations were assessed through 30 items representing brand mark, concessions, social interaction, commitment, team history, organizational attributes, team success, head coach, management, and stadium. Internalization was also assessed through the inclusion of three items, and all scale items were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale, anchored by 'Strongly Disagree' (1) and 'Strongly Agree' (7). The behavioral intentions measure included three items, two being derived from Yoshida and James (2010), and one adopted from Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman (1996). These items were also measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale, but ranging from 'Not Likely at All' (1) to 'Extremely Likely' (7). Appendix B provides detailed information about the survey items.

3.4. Data analysis

Data were analyzed using AMOS 21.0 (SPSS An IBM Company, Chicago, IL). A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to verify the proposed structure of the brand equity model in each group (i.e., fan club members and non-members). The appropriateness of the data to the measurement model was examined using the ratio of chi-square (χ^2) to its degrees of freedom, Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), comparative-of-fit-index (CFI), goodness-of-fit index (GFI), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). Internal consistency of the constructs was measured through composite reliability (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2009). Convergent validity was evaluated through the average variance extracted (AVE), while discriminant validity was established when AVE for each construct exceeded the squared correlations between that construct and any other (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Marôco, 2010). Next, a multi-group CFA analysis was conducted for testing the invariance of the model across fan club members and non-members. The model's invariance among the groups was tested by comparing the unconstrained model (measurement weights varying freely across both groups) with the constrained model (measurement weights fixed to an equal value to both groups) (Loehlin, 2003). Given that the χ^2 difference is judged to be too restrictive we relied on the change in CFI value, which has to be equal or less than .01 to indicate measurement invariance (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002). After testing the measurement invariance, latent mean comparisons were investigated and Cohen's (1988) *d* statistic was computed to obtain the effect sizes. Finally, a multi-group structural equation model (SEM) was performed to assess the predictive validity of the model in each group. The outcome measure of behavioral intentions was used and after testing the model's invariance, a subsequent SEM analysis was performed with the overall sample.

4. Results

4.1. Assessment of team brand equity

In order to assess the psychometric properties of the measures for both fan club members and non-members, the measurement model was first examined separately for each group. The results of the measurement model for both fan club members [$\chi^2(440) = 1700.63$ ($p < .001$), $\chi^2/df = 3.87$, TLI = .94, CFI = .95, GFI = .89, RMSEA = .06 (CI = .054–.060)] and non-members [$\chi^2(440) = 2027.03$ ($p < .001$), $\chi^2/df = 4.61$, TLI = .95, CFI = .96, GFI = .92, RMSEA = .05 (CI = .049–.053)] showed an acceptable fit to the data. Although the χ^2 was significant and its ratio to the degrees of freedom was above the 3.0 criterion (Kline, 1998) in both groups, the χ^2 statistic has been shown to be sensitive to sample size (Hair et al., 2009; Marôco, 2010) with recommendations against its use with large sample sizes as was the case in this study (fan club members: $n = 888$; non-members: $n = 1399$). For fan club members, the GFI was indicative of poor fit, but the TLI and CFI values were greater than the .90 criterion for good fit (Hair et al., 2009). With respect to the non-members, the GFI, TLI and CFI values were all greater than the threshold of .90. In addition, the RMSEA value was equal to or less than .06 suggesting good fit (Hair et al., 2009) in both groups.

As shown in Table 1, all factor loadings were above the cut-off point of .50 (Hair et al., 2009) ranging from .51 to .97 (fan club members), and .59 to .96 (non-members), and thus providing evidence that each item appropriately captured their respective factor. The composite reliability values ranged from .78 to .97 for fan club members and from .80 to .96 for non-members, indicating the constructs were internally consistent across both groups. Evidence of convergent validity was accepted in both groups given that the AVE values for fan club members and non-members ranged from .55 to .90 and from .57 to .90, respectively (see Table 1). Additionally, all constructs were considered to exhibit discriminant validity given all AVE values exceeded the appropriate squared correlations in the two models. Based on these results, the multi-group CFA analysis was then conducted for testing the invariance of the measurement model across fan club members and non-members.

4.2. Comparison between fan club members and non-members

When checking for factorial invariance of the brand equity model across fan club members and non-members, both the unconstrained model [$\chi^2(1248) = 4598.79$ ($p < .01$), $\chi^2/df = 3.69$, TLI = .95, CFI = .95, GFI = .90, RMSEA = .03 (CI = .033–.035)] and the model constraining measurement weights [$\chi^2(1274) = 4657.38$ ($p < .01$), $\chi^2/df = 3.66$, TLI = .95, CFI = .95, GFI = .90, RMSEA = .03 (CI = .033–.035)] showed an acceptable fit to the data. The χ^2 statistic revealed that these models were significantly different from one another [$\Delta\chi^2(26) = 58.59$, $p < .01$] suggesting that measurement invariance was not achieved. However, full measurement invariance is unlikely to hold in practice (Milfont & Fischer, 2010), with literature suggesting that partial measurement invariance can be assessed when measures are invariant across some but not all the groups (Vandenberg & Lance, 2000). The change in CFI value was lower than .01 ($\Delta CFI = .001$) and this value can be considered negligible (Castillo et al., 2010; Cheung & Rensvold, 2002). Thus, using the ΔCFI comparison, we can assume the models' invariance between fan club members and non-members and examine the latent mean comparisons.

Fig. 1 shows the results of the latent mean comparison between groups. We chose non-members to serve as a reference group and fan club members as a comparison group. The mean was set to 0 in the reference group (i.e., non-members), and to vary freely in the comparison group (i.e., fan club members). With the exception of concessions, significant differences were observed in all brand equity dimensions. Specifically, the latent mean (LM) differences for the brand equity dimensions of

Table 1

Factor loading, composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), and squared correlations among the constructs for both groups (fan club members vs. non-members).

				1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Fan club members (n = 888)	Factor loadings	CR	AVE	.58	.69	.62	.55	.74	.70	.75	.90	.84	.71	.75
1. Brand Mark	.51–.95	.80	.58	1.00										
2. Concessions	.73–.91	.87	.69	.04	1.00									
3. Social Interaction	.70–.87	.82	.62	.13	.11	1.00								
4. Commitment	.73–.75	.78	.55	.22	.13	.24	1.00							
5. Team History	.84–.90	.90	.74	.10	.08	.06	.47	1.00						
6. Organizational Attributes	.81–.88	.88	.70	.22	.17	.26	.47	.18	1.00					
7. Team Success	.85–.88	.90	.75	.22	.10	.26	.45	.26	.65	1.00				
8. Head Coach	.94–.97	.97	.90	.09	.04	.14	.23	.12	.44	.68	1.00			
9. Management	.91–.93	.94	.84	.10	.07	.17	.22	.11	.66	.65	.57	1.00		
10. Stadium	.81–.89	.88	.71	.20	.12	.12	.40	.26	.36	.40	.25	.25	1.00	
11. Internalization	.86–.88	.90	.75	.29	.07	.29	.18	.04	.19	.15	.06	.08	.10	1.00
Non-members (n = 1399)	Factor loadings	CR	AVE	.57	.66	.58	.60	.75	.72	.75	.90	.82	.68	.78
1. Brand Mark	.59–.90	.80	.57	1.00										
2. Concessions	.70–.91	.85	.66	.11	1.00									
3. Social Interaction	.70–.85	.80	.58	.24	.27	1.00								
4. Commitment	.73–.83	.82	.60	.42	.15	.32	1.00							
5. Team History	.86–.88	.90	.75	.26	.05	.13	.50	1.00						
6. Organizational Attributes	.83–.87	.88	.72	.28	.18	.30	.54	.29	1.00					
7. Team Success	.86–.87	.90	.75	.27	.13	.27	.53	.44	.63	1.00				
8. Head Coach	.93–.96	.96	.90	.11	.06	.14	.31	.25	.44	.61	1.00			
9. Management	.90–.91	.93	.82	.12	.08	.16	.33	.23	.61	.66	.61	1.00		
10. Stadium	.81–.84	.86	.68	.29	.12	.20	.41	.36	.35	.45	.31	.27	1.00	
11. Internalization	.86–.91	.91	.78	.27	.17	.37	.26	.11	.29	.17	.08	.09	.17	1.00

Model fit (fan club members): $\chi^2(440) = 1700.63$ ($p < .001$), $\chi^2/df = 3.87$, TLI = .94, CFI = .95, GFI = .89, RMSEA = .06 (CI = .054–.060).

Model fit (non-members): $\chi^2(440) = 2027.03$ ($p < .001$), $\chi^2/df = 4.61$, TLI = .95, CFI = .96, GFI = .89, RMSEA = .05 (CI = .049–.053).

brand mark ($\Delta LM = .14$, $Z = 5.12$, $p < .01$), social interaction ($\Delta LM = .40$, $Z = 7.59$, $p < .01$), commitment ($\Delta LM = .16$, $Z = 4.22$, $p < .01$), team history ($\Delta LM = .08$, $Z = 2.35$, $p < .05$), organizational attributes ($\Delta LM = .14$, $Z = 3.03$, $p < .01$), team success ($\Delta LM = .15$, $Z = 3.23$, $p < .01$), head coach ($\Delta LM = .21$, $Z = 3.73$, $p < .01$), management ($\Delta LM = .20$, $Z = 2.96$, $p < .01$) and stadium ($\Delta LM = .09$, $Z = 2.02$, $p < .05$), as well as internalization ($\Delta LM = .91$, $Z = 14.89$, $p < .01$) were significant when compared to non-members. The positive Z values suggest that the comparison group (fan club members) has higher latent mean values than the reference group (non-members). In addition, Cohen's (1988) d statistic for the brand equity dimensions where significant differences were observed between the two groups revealed the following effect sizes: brand mark ($d = .23$), social interaction ($d = .36$), commitment ($d = .20$), team history ($d = .11$), organizational attributes ($d = .14$), team success ($d = .15$), head coach ($d = .16$), management ($d = .13$), stadium ($d = .09$), and internalization ($d = .66$).

4.3. Predictive validity

First, a CFA including the eleven dimensions of brand equity and behavioral intentions was conducted separately for each group. The model for both fan club members [$\chi^2(528) = 1881.95$ ($p < .001$), $\chi^2/df = 3.56$, TLI = .94, CFI = .95, GFI = .89, RMSEA = .05 (CI = .051–.056)] and non-members [$\chi^2(528) = 2243.73$ ($p < .001$), $\chi^2/df = 4.25$, TLI = .95, CFI = .96, GFI = .91, RMSEA = .05 (CI = .046–.050)] showed an acceptable fit to the data. The composite reliability value for behavioral intentions showed the construct was internally consistent in both groups (Fan club members: CR = .78; Non-members: CR = .82). Evidence of convergent validity was accepted across both groups for behavioral intentions (Fan club members: AVE = .54; Non-members: AVE = .60). This construct was also considered to exhibit discriminant validity given the AVE value was greater than the squared correlation with any associated construct in both models (see Appendix B). Based on these results, a multi-group SEM analysis was conducted to test if the structural relationships between brand equity dimensions and behavioral intentions were different in each group.

The multi-group SEM analysis showed that both the unconstrained [$\chi^2(1056) = 4125.80$ ($p < .001$), $\chi^2/df = 3.91$, TLI = .94, CFI = .95, GFI = .91, RMSEA = .04 (CI = .035–.037)], and the constrained model [$\chi^2(1091) = 4193.42$ ($p < .001$), $\chi^2/df = 3.84$, TLI = .94, CFI = .95, GFI = .90, RMSEA = .04 (CI = .034–.036)] showed an acceptable fit to the data. The change in CFI value was .001, which is considered a negligible value (Castillo et al., 2010) indicating the models' invariance between fan club members and non-members. This suggests that the path coefficients between the two groups were not significantly different, and thus, the two groups were merged and the structural relationships were examined using the overall sample ($n = 2287$). The results of the measurement and structural models with the overall sample were equal and found to be acceptable [$\chi^2(528) = 3332.48$ ($p < .001$), $\chi^2/df = 6.31$, TLI = .95, CFI = .96, GFI = .92, RMSEA = .05 (CI = .047–.050)]. Fig. 2 reports the structural relationships among latent variables. The brand equity dimensions of social interaction ($\beta = .16$,

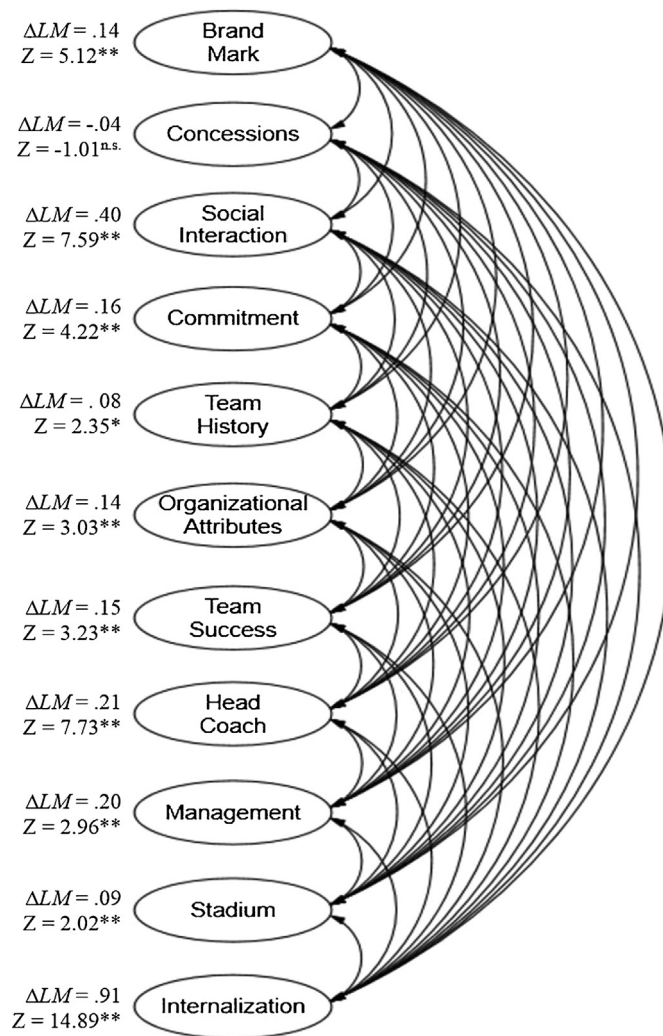


Fig. 1. Latent mean comparison of the brand equity dimensions between fan club members and non-members. Notes. Unconstrained model: $\chi^2(1248) = 4598.79$ ($p < .01$), $\chi^2/df = 3.69$, TLI = .95, CFI = .95, GFI = .90, RMSEA = .03 (CI = .033–.035). Constrained model: $\chi^2(1274) = 4657.38$ ($p < .01$), $\chi^2/df = 3.66$, TLI = .95, CFI = .95, GFI = .90, RMSEA = .03 (CI = .033–.035). n.s. = not significant; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$. LM = Latent mean.

$p < .01$), team success ($\beta = .22$, $p < .01$), and internalization ($\beta = .47$, $p < .01$) showed a positive effect on behavioral intentions. Team history ($\beta = -.08$, $p < .05$) showed a significant negative effect on behavioral intentions, while the path coefficients for brand mark, concessions, commitment, organizational attributes, head coach, management, and stadium were not significant in predicting behavioral intentions ($p > .05$). Altogether, the brand equity dimensions accounted for approximately 59% of the variance in behavioral intentions ($R^2 = .59$).

5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the differences in team brand equity perceptions between fan club members and non-members, and the predictive role of brand equity dimensions on behavioral intentions. The results provide important implications for sport managers in the football industry by providing evaluative and analytical tools to help manage the team brand and cultivate robust and enduring relationships with fans of the club. While previous research has suggested the central need for professional sport teams to manage brand equity to remain financially solvent (Teed et al., 2009), a lack of research exists in the sport management literature examining how team brand equity perceptions vary across different types of customers. Considering that no research has been conducted to understand whether fan club members and non-members have differential perceptions about their team's brand equity, and the effects of unique brand equity dimensions on behavioral outcomes, the current study contributes to the sport management literature in three important ways.

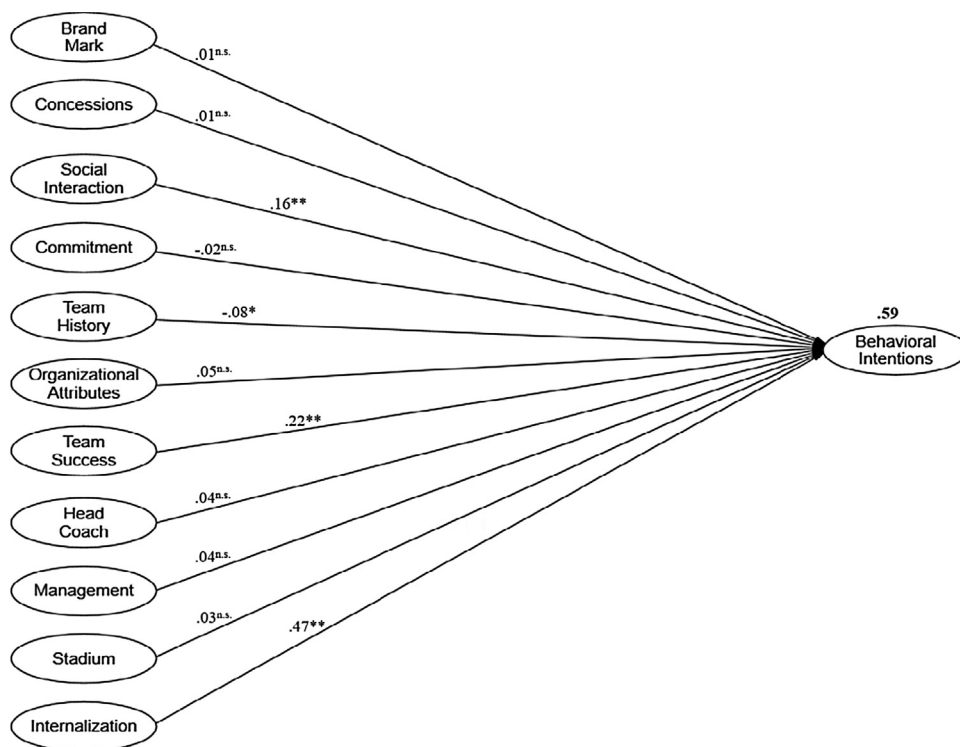


Fig. 2. Standardized estimates of the structural model for the overall sample. Notes. $\chi^2(528) = 3332.48$ ($p < .001$), $\chi^2/df = 6.31$, TLI = .95, CFI = .96, GFI = .92, RMSEA = .05 (CI = .047–.050). * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

The first contribution of this research lies in the evidence of fair psychometric properties of the model for both fan club members and non-members. All brand equity dimensions showed good construct validity. Also, partial measurement invariance was accepted in the two groups suggesting that the brand equity model used in this study is a reliable tool to use with fan club members and non-members within the football environment. It has been suggested that brand equity contributes to an organization's financial performance (Kim & Kim, 2003), and the measurement of brand equity is paramount for "understanding the objectives, the mechanisms, and especially the net impact of the holistic impact of marketing" (Reynolds & Phillips, 2005, p. 171). In this sense, understanding how to measure brand equity around fans' perceptions of the team brand is vital to connect with both fan club members and non-members. Due to the financial pressures facing clubs in general and the increasing competition in the marketplace, sport marketers need to understand the fans' perceptions of the team in order to develop marketing strategies aimed at increasing the team brand value, and to engage fans in subsequent positive responses towards the team, such as attending more games and purchasing other products or services (Theodorakis et al., 2013; Yoshida, Gordon, Nakazawa, & Biscaia, 2014). Thus, through the testing of a brand equity model with fan club members and non-members, this research adds to the sport management literature and extends our understanding of the differential brand equity perceptions among different types of customers of football clubs.

A second contribution of this research is to investigate the distinctive perception of brand equity dimensions among fan club members and non-members. The analysis of the latent mean differences revealed that fan club members do indeed have a better perception of brand equity dimensions than non-members, with significant differences being identified in ten of the eleven dimensions proposed in the model. These findings are consistent with prior studies suggesting those who use certain brands more often like them more than those who use them occasionally (Sharp, 2010), and that high relational customers often evaluate the organization better (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999). That is, the findings from this study are in line with the idea that fans with a stronger link to a team such as fan club members or season ticket holders tend to process more information and develop a greater perception of the team brand (Lock et al., 2012; McDonald, 2010). It is also important to note that almost all non-members were not season ticket holders, while about half of the fan club members were season ticket holders (Appendix A). Considering that fan club members have discounts and priority when buying season tickets (Sport Lisboa e Benfica, 2013; Yoshida & Gordon, 2012), this suggests that these fans also tend to support the team more often at the stadium.

The highest latent mean difference between fan club members and non-members was identified on the dimension of internalization, with fan club members showing to be more internalized than non-members. Internalization occurs when a sport consumer perceives a higher level of value congruence between the person and the sport team, leading him or her to incorporate the team's values and actions into their own value system (Inoue & Kent, 2012). Considering that team brand

awareness (i.e., recall and recognition) is usually high for a sport like football due to its global popularity (Bauer et al., 2008; Pyun, Kwon, & Lee, 2011), internalization seems to have a crucial role for managing brand equity (Biscaia et al., 2013; Ross et al., 2008) with a particular emphasis among fan club members. Accordingly, clubs should try to establish a reciprocal relationship with fans in order to ensure they feel valued and keep supporting the team over the season (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005). For example, by offering free tickets to frequent spectators engaged in membership programs in order to bring friends to the matches, or exhibiting photos of the fan club members on the clubs' website, organizations can create a higher level of value congruence between the person and the sport team. These strategies may also prove to have a paramount role for non-members, given that internalization was also highly ranked among non-members (see Appendix B).

Social interaction was the second dimension with the highest latent mean difference between the two groups with the analysis of the effect size indicating a medium importance of membership status (Cohen, 1988; Marôco, 2010). This suggests that the opportunity for spectators to interact with friends and other fans during football events is more important for fan club members. Social interaction is often highlighted as an experiential benefit of the consumption experience at the stadium contributing to understand team brand equity (Bauer et al., 2008; Ross et al., 2008). Thus, creating social events before and after the games for fan club members may be important to increase the sense of community (Grant, Heere, & Dickson, 2011), perceptions of team brand equity, and to better communicate with those consumers to foster rich relationships (Heere et al., 2011).

The dimensions of brand mark and commitment were also significantly different among fan club members and non-members. Prior research on branding suggests that logos act as the primary visual representation of the brand's general image and meaning (Park, Eisingerich, Pol, & Park, 2013), while the notion of fans' commitment to the team is an important component of the team's brand image representing a non-product-related attribute of the brand that aids to in creation of its equity (Ross, James, & Vargas, 2006). In this sense, match promotions should highlight the club's logo and the fans' enduring support to the team in order to reinforce the team's brand image. However, it is important to note that a small effect size was observed in both cases (Cohen, 1988) indicating that membership status plays a small role in understanding the latent mean differences in these dimensions. This suggests that even though fan club members showed a better perception of the team's logo and uniforms as well as of the overall fans' commitment to the team than non-members, these differences have only a small effect that is uniquely attributed to the membership status.

Significant differences were also observed in the dimensions of team history, organizational attributes, team success, head coach, management, and stadium. The importance of these dimensions to understand team brand equity has been often mentioned in the sport management literature (e.g., Bauer et al., 2005; Gladden & Funk, 2002; Ross et al., 2008). It is therefore suggested that clubs should highlight aspects of on-field success, commitment and competence of the non-player personnel, enduring traditions of the club, and the characteristics of the home stadium in order to properly manage the team brand. However, although significant differences were found between fan club members and non-members in all these dimensions, the analysis of the effect sizes suggests a very low effect based on membership status. This may limit the practical meaningfulness of the suggested managerial implications exclusively based on the analysis of membership status for these dimensions. Thus, these findings suggest that clubs may not need to design differential marketing strategies for fan club members and non-members on these brand equity dimensions.

The third contribution of this research lies in the examination of the distinctive impact of brand equity dimensions on behavioral intentions in a professional football environment. Past research has suggested that brand equity increases customers' trust in purchase decisions (Aaker, 1991) leading to enhanced behavioral intentions (Bauer et al., 2008; Yoshida & Gordon, 2012). However, the contribution of each unique dimension of the brand equity construct has not yet been examined, and is critical for enhancing the link between team and fans and generating long-term relationships. The results of the multi-group SEM analysis revealed that the linkages between brand equity dimensions and behavioral intentions were not significantly different across the two groups. This finding suggests that even though fan club members rank the brand equity dimensions higher than non-members, the predictive role of these dimensions on behavioral intentions is not significantly different across the two groups. These results are in line with the idea that occasional buyers are also important for achieving brand growth (Sharp, 2010), and sport teams should recognize the potential of all supporters to enhance team brand value by trying to provide meaningful relationships with supporters no matter what type of connection they have with the team.

The brand equity dimensions accounted for 59% of the variance in behavioral intentions for the model with the overall sample, but not all dimensions were found to be significant predictors. Internalization was the strongest predictor of behavioral intentions confirming the vital role of this variable for managing brand equity and increasing fans' favorable future behaviors (Inoue & Kent, 2012). It means that the higher the value congruence between the fan and the team, the greater his/her intentions to support the team over the season by attending more games and purchasing other products and services. Social interaction and team success also showed positive significant effects on behavioral intentions. However, the small effect sizes of the path coefficients (Cohen, 1988; Marôco, 2010) indicate that these dimensions play a small role in predicting behavioral intentions. If fans do not have good internalization levels, an increase in the other dimensions will only have a marginal effect on raising their behavioral intentions. On the other hand, team history showed a negative effect on behavioral intentions; yet the low magnitude of this path coefficient indicates that perhaps the path was statistically significant due to the large sample size (Cohen, 1988). This path coefficient indicates that less than one percent (.06%) of the variance in behavioral intentions is attributed to team history. Thus, recommendations based on this relationship may lead to unnecessary managerial efforts and be misleading for clubs.

Taken together, findings from this study indicate that fan club members have a better perception of team brand equity than non-members. With the exception of concessions, significant differences were observed in all brand equity dimensions,

with internalization being the construct with the highest difference between the two groups. As noted by [Kim, James, and Kim \(2013\)](#), a thorough understanding of various consumer segments is advantageous in order to create more targeted strategies for different types of fans. Even though the difference between fan club members and non-members in some brand equity dimensions was of low magnitude, clubs should keep trying to increase their fan club members' loyal base due to the financial benefits derived from having this stable source of revenue ([McDonald & Stravos, 2007](#)). Notwithstanding, increased perceptions of the internalization, team success, and social interaction dimensions are vital for increasing behavioral intentions across both fan club members and non-members. An appropriate strategy for increasing these brand equity dimensions may also be important in attracting indirect financial support, given that previous studies have suggested that sponsors are more attracted to invest in teams with a strong and regular base of supporters at the stadium because of the possibility of reaching mass audiences of potential consumers ([Biscaia, Correia, Ross, & Rosado, 2014](#); [Crompton, 2004](#)).

6. Limitations and future research

There are limitations in this study that may have influenced the study's results and should be considered for future research. First, this research only focuses on one European football league and might not be representative of other football leagues in Europe and around the globe. Given the globalization and the worldwide popularity of football, future research should explore differences in the dimensionality of sport brand equity between football leagues. The cultural and historical aspects of each league, the transient nature of international players, and the mass media coverage of the football leagues require further investigation to compare and validate the results found in this study. In addition, although the scale used in this study had proved to be a reliable tool for measuring the brand equity of professional football teams ([Biscaia et al., 2013](#)), additional research could incorporate other dimensions proposed in the literature such as rivalry ([Ross et al., 2008](#)), escape ([Bauer et al., 2008](#)), star players and sponsor alignment ([Kerr & Gladden, 2008](#)) in order to extend our understanding of fans' perceptions regarding their teams. Previous studies have also suggested that consumers connect with brands at both cognitive and emotional levels ([Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010](#)). While brands should not lose sight of their cognitive components, the most successful brands also evoke strong positive emotions ([Nowak, Tach, & Olsen, 2006](#)), suggesting that the inclusion of both elements in future studies may contribute to a better assessment of team brand equity.

A second limitation and potential research opportunity would be to examine the length of commitment from paid members. That is, this study did not control for the length of membership by the paying members. It is possible that the duration of fan club membership provides more brand-specific knowledge and experience ([Ross et al., 2009](#)) with long-term relationships leading to more efficient storage and retrieval of associations to that target brand ([Alba & Hutchinson, 1987](#)). For example, there might be a correlation between the length of fan club membership and the overall importance of the team history dimension. That is, those fans with long histories of club membership typically have greater knowledge of club history and may draw upon past events in developing brand equity evaluations. Also, it would be interesting to conduct a longitudinal study of brand equity in order to investigate how these relationships might change over time. Furthermore, while this study focused on a relational moderator (i.e., fan club membership), future studies could examine the role of psychological moderators (e.g., engagement or team identification) on fans' perceptions of team brand equity. This would provide important information to club marketers in terms of how supporters develop into fully engaged customers.

Additionally, a third limitation and research opportunity may be related to the sample composition. That is, while this study only focuses on comparing team brand equity perceptions between fan club members and non-members, the representativeness of the sample in comparison to the population was not controlled. Previous studies suggest that other demographic characteristics can also play an important role on consumer perceptions towards the brand. For example, [Cole et al. \(2008\)](#) highlight that the way brand information is processed by consumers tends to vary according to their age, and the great majority of respondents in the current study were below 30 years old. In this sense, a suggestion for future research would be to control sample composition by using different methodologies (e.g. both on-line surveys and interviews at the stadium) in order to increase the representativeness of football supporters and to obtain a more accurate understanding of brand equity among different types of sport consumers. Additional studies could also assess how perceptions of brand equity vary across different teams. [Sharp \(2010\)](#) mentions that stronger brands tend to have a higher degree of market penetration and consumer loyalty, while [Doyle et al. \(2013\)](#) suggest that differences in exposure and accessibility between high and low market share teams may impact fans' perceptions of these teams. For example, while FC Barcelona have more than 200,000 paid members and a strong international reputation for success ([UEFA, 2014](#)), other teams from the Spanish league have not even played a single international game. Thus, understanding how team brand perception varies among fans from different clubs may represent an important contribution for increasing the league attractiveness.

Further opportunities for future research might examine the role of fan club membership on brand extensions from a consumer's perspective (e.g., perceptions and behavioral intentions toward brand extensions). Brand extensions are viewed as a popular strategy for professional sport teams in developing new sources of revenue and extending the brand relationship with the consumer ([Walsh, Chien, & Ross, 2012](#)). European football clubs often develop and offer various brand extensions (e.g., insurance, beverages, magazines, television network), and the information gathered on this type of brand-product-consumer relationship might offer additional strategic implications. Also, the branding literature suggests that the parent brand image (i.e., club image) can either be damaged ([John, Loken, & Joiner, 1998](#)) or positively influenced ([Aaker, 1991](#)) based on the consumer's experience with a brand extension. Thus, extending the model used in

this study by including consumers' perceptions and behavioral intentions towards brand extension may provide an interesting discussion on how to improve the management of sport team brands.

In summary, this study represents an initial effort to understand how the perceptions of team brand equity dimensions vary between fan club members and non-members, and the role of unique brand equity dimensions on behavioral intentions. The results indicate that fan club members have a greater perception of the team brand, particularly concerning the dimensions of internalization and social interaction. The latent mean differences observed in the proposed model, the observed structural relationships and recommendations provide important opportunities for a continuous understanding of sport brand equity and its role in the football domain. Football clubs should consider the implications derived from this study for managing their respective brands.

Appendix A. Demographic characteristics of the respondents

Demographic variables	Fan club members (n = 888)	Non-members (n = 1399)	Overall sample (n = 2287)
<i>Gender</i>			
Male (%)	97.0	97.8	97.5
Female (%)	3.0	2.2	2.5
<i>Age*</i>			
18–29 (%)	67.4	76.3	72.9
30–39 (%)	19.8	14.8	16.7
40–49 (%)	7.3	4.8	5.7
50 or over (%)	5.5	4.1	4.7
<i>Education level</i>			
Less than high school (%)	3.4	4.5	4.1
High school graduate (%)	40.0	44.7	42.9
College or post-graduate (%)	56.6	50.8	53.0
<i>Season ticket holder</i>			
Yes (%)	44.4	2.9	19.0
No (%)	55.6	97.1	81.0
<i>Companion</i>			
Alone (%)	4.5	8.9	7.3
Plus 1 person (%)	19.7	17.3	18.2
Plus 2–3 persons (%)	48.1	50.1	49.3
Plus 4 or over (%)	27.7	23.7	25.2

Note. * Mean ages: Fan club members = 27.54 years old (SD = 8.71); Non-members = 25.80 years old (SD = 7.32); Overall sample = 26.47 years old (SD = 7.92).

Appendix B. Descriptive statistics, CFA item statistics and correlation matrix for fan club members and non-members

Variables	Fan club members			Non-members		
	M (SD)	Factor loadings	CR	M (SD)	Factor loadings	CR
<i>Brand Mark</i>	6.34 (.79)		.80	5.94 (.96)		.80
I like my team's logo		.759			.749	
My team's uniforms are attractive		.510			.593	
My team's logo has character		.949			.899	
<i>Concessions</i>	4.42 (1.43)		.87	4.47 (1.18)		.85
There are specific foods at the arena that I like to eat		.725			.697	
I enjoy eating at the arena		.848			.812	
Eating and drinking at the arena is something that I like to do		.905			.910	
<i>Social Interaction</i>	5.57 (1.27)		.82	5.14 (1.30)		.80
Being a fan of the team is a good way to meet other people		.698			.700	
I am able to see friends because of the team		.779			.726	
The team provides a good place to see friends		.874			.849	
<i>Commitment</i>	6.38 (1.83)		.78	6.23 (.91)		.82
Many fans regularly follow the team		.745			.733	
The loyalty of the fans is very noticeable		.726			.756	
Fans have followed the team for a long time		.745			.826	
<i>Team History</i>	6.68 (.71)		.90	6.61 (.78)		.90
The team has a history of winning		.844			.857	
The team has a rich history		.841			.869	
There is a successful history behind the team		.898			.880	
<i>Organizational Attributes</i>	5.80 (1.16)		.88	5.64 (1.21)		.88
The team is very loyal to its fans		.882			.870	
The devotions to fans by the team is very obvious		.805			.828	
The team is heartfelt to its fans		.827			.845	

Appendix B (Continued)

Variables	Fan club members			Non-members		
	M (SD)	Factor loadings	CR	M (SD)	Factor loadings	CR
<i>Team Success</i>	6.04 (1.01)		.90	5.90 (1.07)		.90
The team has high quality players		.879			.875	
The team is a great team		.863			.857	
The team has a good performance in competitions		.854			.861	
<i>Head Coach</i>	5.94 (1.35)		.97	5.72 (1.43)		.96
The team's head coach does a fantastic job		.945			.951	
The team has an excellent head coach		.965			.962	
I like the head coach of my team		.943			.925	
<i>Management</i>	5.30 (1.49)		.94	5.11 (1.58)		.93
The management of the club is outstanding		.916			.903	
I like the managers of my club		.929			.913	
The managers of my club strive to improve the team		.905			.899	
<i>Stadium</i>	6.34 (1.08)		.88	6.26 (1.06)		.86
My team's arena has "personality"		.831			.839	
The architecture of my team's arena is attractive		.808			.829	
The arena enhances the enjoyment of going to see the games		.886			.805	
<i>Internalization</i>	6.15 (1.20)		.90	5.25 (1.68)		.91
Being a fan of my favorite team is a large part of who I am		.868			.877	
I "live and breathe" my favorite team		.876			.905	
I like to think that I "bleed the colours" of my favorite team		.860			.863	
<i>Behavioral Intentions</i>	5.78 (1.27)		.78	4.91 (1.56)		.82
The probability to attend more games of my team		.669			.743	
The likelihood to recommend my team games to other people		.859			.860	
The likelihood to purchase other products and services of my team		.671			.717	

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Fan club members												
1. Brand Mark	1.00											
2. Concessions	.21	1.00										
3. Social Interaction	.36	.34	1.00									
4. Commitment	.47	.37	.49	1.00								
5. Team History	.32	.28	.25	.68	1.00							
6. Organizational Attributes	.47	.41	.51	.68	.42	1.00						
7. Team Success	.47	.31	.51	.67	.51	.81	1.00					
8. Head Coach	.30	.19	.37	.48	.35	.66	.82	1.00				
9. Management	.32	.27	.42	.47	.33	.81	.81	.76	1.00			
10. Stadium	.45	.35	.35	.64	.51	.60	.64	.50	.50	1.00		
11. Internalization	.54	.27	.54	.42	.19	.44	.39	.24	.28	.32	1.00	
12. Behavioral intentions	.42	.26	.57	.42	.20	.56	.56	.42	.47	.40	.61	1.00
Non-members												
1. Brand Mark	1.00											
2. Concessions	.34	1.00										
3. Social Interaction	.49	.52	1.00									
4. Commitment	.65	.38	.56	1.00								
5. Team History	.51	.23	.35	.71	1.00							
6. Organizational Attributes	.53	.43	.55	.73	.54	1.00						
7. Team Success	.52	.36	.52	.73	.67	.80	1.00					
8. Head Coach	.33	.25	.37	.56	.50	.66	.78	1.00				
9. Management	.35	.28	.40	.58	.48	.78	.81	.78	1.00			
10. Stadium	.54	.34	.44	.64	.60	.59	.67	.56	.52	1.00		
11. Internalization	.52	.41	.61	.51	.33	.54	.41	.28	.30	.42	1.00	
12. Behavioral intentions	.46	.42	.59	.54	.37	.60	.58	.46	.48	.48	.68	1.00

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