



THE ROLE OF FAN IDENTIFICATION ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SPORTS LEAGUE BRAND ASSOCIATIONS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL COMMITMENT

Kadir Yağızⁱ

Graduate School of Health Sciences,
Hacettepe University,
Turkey

Abstract:

The purpose of this study is to test multi-items sports league brand associations in the leagues that are structured as open competition format and to investigate the mediating role of league fan identification on the relationship between league brand associations and psychological commitment. Proposed relationships were measured by structural equation modelling. Six brand association dimensions were identified. It was also found that league fan identification is a critical psychological connection in the development of psychological commitment of league consumers to a sports league, and a mediator between the brand association of nostalgia, escape, and peer group acceptance and psychological commitment.

Keywords: brand association, fan identification, brand management, sports league management, sports league consumers

1. Introduction

Leagues that are strategically and proactively branded, reaping the benefit of earning more revenue from the indirect income sources like broadcasting rights and sponsorships than the direct income of gate revenue (e.g., ticket sales). The total approximate revenues of the English Premier League (EPL), Spanish La Liga, Germany's Bundesliga, Italy's Serie A and France's League 1, which are called 'big five' in Europe, were respectively € 5,3 bn., € 2,9 bn., € 2,8 bn., 2,0 bn., € 1,6 bn. in 2016-2017 season, while the Turkish Super Football League (TSFL), which is the largest revenue-generating league in Europe behind the 'big five', has total approximate revenues of € 734 m. in the same season (Deloitte, 2018). One of the reasons for the considerable difference in revenue among the leagues could be attributed to their brand management and brand equity they have. The leagues like TSFL still have potential to improve its brand image and brand equity through

ⁱ Correspondence: email kadiryaqiz@hacettepe.edu.tr

developing favourable brand associations to generate more revenue and attract worldwide consumers. Perception of brand associations significant for fan identification, that leads and strengthens to psychological commitment (PC) (Funk and James, 2001). Fan identification process along with brand associations is essential in transforming spectators (those who merely observe sport) into commitment fans (those who are allegiant to a specific sport or teams) (Kolbe and James, 2000). Therefore, sports leagues through brand associations have potential to provide identified and committed fan community around their brand, which is an important market segment that sports organizations will desire and benefit from (Kunkel et al., 2014a).

The sports league brand association (SLBA) research has mainly focused on the leagues that are structured as closed competition format (i.e., no promotion, no relegation). SLBA research, however, is still relatively new and comparative research of leagues with different brand images that are structured as open competition format (i.e., promotion, relegation), is needed. The correlation between SLBAs and PC has identified before (Kunkel et al., 2014b), but the validity of the multi-items SLBAs and the role of league fan identification (LFI) on the relationship between SLBAs and PC have not investigated in sports league context. The correlations between SLBAs and PC present valuable insight initially, however, do not explain how PC develops. So, filling these gaps in the literature, this study has two objectives. The first is to test the SLBAs, which have been measured with a single item within the closed competition formatted leagues in previous studies, with multiple items in the case of an open competition formatted league context. The second is to investigate the relationships of each SLBA with LFI and PC as well as the mediating role of LFI on these relationships based on the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) (Funk and James, 2001).

2. Literature Review

Brand association was defined as *“anything linked in memory to a brand”* (Aaker, 1991, p.109) and characterized as one of the essential elements of brand equity. According to Keller (1993), brand associations cover all the thoughts, feelings, and perceptions, experiences in the individual’s memory about a particular brand and give the brand meaning in the mind of consumers. The associations such as star player, which gives a message related to a sports product performance, are classified as attributes; the advantages of consuming the sports product for consumers such as escape, are classified to be benefits and structures such as affective reactions classified as attitude association (Gladden and Funk, 2002; Ross et al., 2008), following Keller’s (1993) concepts. Then, the significant relationships among different classified brand associations, and between brand associations and loyalty (Bauer et al., 2008; Gladden and Funk, 2001, 2002); consumer satisfaction and behavioural intentions (Biscaia et al., 2013); the differences in brand associations perception between the small market share and large market share teams’ fans (Doyle et al., 2013), between the fan club members and non-members (Biscaia et al., 2016), and the impact of brand associations on brand superiority and brand affect

(Gordon and James, 2017) were shown in the team context. Researches on brand associations of sports teams have provided important insights into how to develop a sustainable and loyalty-based relationship between brands and team consumers.

2.1. Sports League Brand Associations

Several researchers have expanded research on team brand associations in the context of sports leagues. Kunkel et al. (2014b) developed seventeen SLBAs by adapting existing team brand associations and revealing new SLBAs directly from league consumers and identified that the strength of SLBAs showed differences according to the league brands. In another study, Kunkel et al. (2017) demonstrated that league brand partially mediated the relationship between team brand and team related behaviours. The authors (Kunkel et al., 2017) also showed that team brand associations have an impact on SLBAs, which indicates that there is a spill-over effect from the associations of teams (as sub-brands) to their league brand (as a master brand). Overall, it can be concluded that some team brand associations could concurrently function as SLBA and create a theoretical basis in the scope of sports leagues (Kunkel et al., 2014b). In addition, SLBAs may vary depending on the league context.

One of the motivations behind the realization of this research is the need for more research on the brand associations of sports leagues. Kunkel et al. (2014b, 2017) used a single item for each brand association and called to investigate a multi-items league brand association scale. Also, the perception of brand associations may be affected depending on the structuring of the sports league and the brand characteristics (Daniels et al., 2019). However, studies on SLBA are limited to the relatively young leagues (e.g., A-League, founded 1977 and restructured in 2005), structured as a closed competition format with fixed ten teams, and is operated in the franchising system in the Australian context (Hyundai A-League 2020a; Kunkel et al., 2014b; 2017). In this format, the league does not have teams promoted to a top league or relegated to a lower league, and the teams that complete the regular season in the top six remain in the final series (Hyundai A-League 2020b). Hence, the results obtained should be considered in the transfer to other leagues; and it was another call that the validity and reliability of SLBAs should be examined in open competition formatted and more established leagues (cf. Kunkel et al., 2017). Therefore, it is particularly important to test the SLBAs (not team brand associations) in a European football context, in which many strongest and great football teams and leading league brands compete in open formatted competitions. The TSFL is a relevant context for this research for some reasons. The TSFL, established in 1959 but re-named and re-formatted in 2002, is a reasonably well-established league (Eryılmaz and Er, 2016). The TSFL, which provides an open formatted competition as similar other European football leagues, operates by Turkish Football Federation which is a governing body of professional football leagues in Turkey. There are eighteen teams in the league, and each team meets one another two times in a season. At the end of each season, the teams completed the last three places in the ranking relegate to a lower league, while the teams the lower league in the top three promote to the Super League (Tff.org. 2020).

Moreover, unlike the A-League, there is no substantial salary cap implementation, which limits the salaries received by the athletes to facilitate competitive balance and parity between teams (Hyundai A-league 2020c), in TSFL. Thus, the following research question will be examined in this study:

Research Question 1: What are the potential brand associations of the Turkish Super Football League consumers regarding the league?

The fifteen SLBAs have identified for use in the research. The associations and their definitions were given in Appendix A.

2.2. League Fan Identification and Psychological Commitment

Fan identification is one of the results of sports consumers' psychological connection to a sports object (e.g., team, league, and athlete) (Funk and James, 2001). Highly identified fans tend more to attend and watch games, pay more for tickets, spend more money on team merchandise, remain loyal (Carlson et al., 2009; Fink et al., 2002), more involved with the team (Wann and Bronscombe, 1993), and feel like part of a sports team (Funk and James, 2001). Individuals may be motivated to form identification with a sports object to satisfy the need to identify with something successful and admirable (e.g., Barcelona Football Club), and enhance his or her self-esteem (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Gladden and Funk, 2002). An individual may also identify with a local team which has no significant achievement, only to fit in and social interaction in a new community (Funk and James, 2001), thus satisfy the need for belonging (Gladden and Funk, 2002). Identifying with a team or a league due to the image congruence between the team's or league's brand and an individual's values or image (cf. Sirgy et al., 1997) is also possible. Briefly, league brands can be capable of embodying, informing, and communicating the identities and images as other brands (cf. Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003) and teams do. League brands also provide a social identity (e.g., "I am a fan of Premier League") to their consumers, and can satisfy league consumers' self-distinctiveness (as a league fan) and self-enhancement (by vicarious prestige/success) (cf. Becerra and Badrinarayanan, 2013). Therefore, in this study, LFI refers to the level of psychological attachment felt by a sports fan towards his or her favourite league and the ability of a sports league to provide a source of identification (cf. Gladden and Funk, 2002; Wakefield, 1995).

The PCM (Funk and James, 2001, 2006), on which we based our hypotheses in this study, presents a theoretical framework that may account how a spectator moves from initial awareness of a sports object to finally allegiance (loyal) fan. According to the PCM, the four hierarchical levels are catalysed by the interaction of outcome of each level, socio-psychological factors, and the mental associations related to the sport object (Funk and James, 2006). In the awareness level, the individual learns about the existence of a sports object generally through the significant others (e.g., family, friends) or social agents (e.g., media). If the individual chooses or interests in with a sports object by comparing and evaluating other alternatives to satisfy his or her socio-psychological needs (i.e., achievement, acceptance) or hedonic motivations (i.e., the desire for entertainment), this indicates that the individual is in the attraction level (Funk and James, 2001). The initial

attitude formation and diversification of associations in the mind of the individual derived from hedonic motives, dispositional needs and social situational factors are the outcomes of this level (Funk and James, 2006). Then, the individual moves to the attachment level, where an emotional connection to a sports object is developed. In the attachment, the significance placed on social-psychological needs, associations (e.g., escape, excitement, star players), and the relationship with sports object take on greater intrinsic importance (Funk and James, 2001). Attachment process results in fan identification and forms attitudes due to the integration of the sport object into the self-concept as well as it leads to allegiance level that reflects the durability and impact of the attachment outcomes (Funk and James, 2006).

According to PCM, fan identification to a sports object occurs if social-psychological needs and accompanying associations to these needs that the sport object provides, take on internal psychological meaning for an individual (Funk and James, 2001). Also, fan identification has been accepted theoretically as a result of brand benefits (not as an association) in recent researches (Kunkel et al., 2016; Lock et al., 2012). Some associations such as social interaction, excitement, escape (Fink et al., 2002) had a significant influence on fan identification in the team context. Despite the recognized importance of fan identification in sports teams, the relationships between the brand associations and fan identification have not examined in sports league context. Sports consumers perceive team and league brands differently and both brand influence consumer involvement and have the dominant consumers (league dominant versus team dominant) separately (Kunkel et al., 2013). Therefore, based on the PCM and previous researches, we assert that some SLBAs may have a significant influence on league consumers' identification to a sports league brand. Hence, the following hypothesis was established.

H1: Sports league brand associations have a significant influence on the league consumers' identification to a sports league brand.

In the PCM, another result of sport consumers' psychological connection to a sports object is the PC which is "*an attitude (i.e., evaluation of that relationship) that persists over time, resist counter attitudinal information, biases cognitive processing and guides behaviour*" (Funk and James, 2001, p. 137). PC represents the desire and resolve of the sports consumers to continue participation in sport (Scanlan et al., 1993). PC also was put forward as the best explanatory concept of the attitudinal dimension of loyalty in sports context (Funk and James, 2001, 2006; Kwon and Trail, 2003; Mahony et al., 2000). The authors argued that people committed to a product or service would be more prone to re-buy the service or product and to have a positive brand or experience evaluations (Havitz and Howard, 1995), and they would be more interested in watching and attending the team's activities which they supported (Smith et al., 1981).

According to PCM (Funk and James, 2001), the associations related to the sport object which is accumulated, strengthened, and internalized across the earlier levels of the psychological connection process, continuous to contribute to the allegiance level. The significant direct effect of some team brand associations on PC (Bauer et al., 2005) and

allegiance (psychological commitment and the behavioural dimension of loyalty was combined) was empirically demonstrated based on PCM (Doyle et al., 2013; Funk and James, 2006; Gladden and Funk, 2001). In addition, Kunkel et al. (2014b) identified that there were significant correlations between SLBAs and PC in sports leagues. These pieces of evidence suggest that committed league fans may hold specific brand associations relating to a sports league. Hence, based on the PCM and previous researches, we assert that some SLBAs may have a significant direct influence on league consumers' PC to a sports league brand. Thus, the following hypothesis was established.

H2: Sports league brand associations have a significant influence on the league consumers' psychological commitment to a sports league brand.

Those who called 'spurious allegiant' hold some positive brand associations and exhibits some loyal behaviours, but the strength of their relationship with the sport object would probably tenuous and not part of the extended self (Funk and James, 2001). According to the PCM (Funk and James, 2001), the developmental progression for an individual toward true allegiance, however, mostly depends on the extent to brand associations take on a heightened level of personal meaning and the strength of attitude formation within attachment level. Therefore, the individuals who possess a strong attitude and identification toward a sports object are called true loyal fans (Funk and James, 2006). The correlations between SLBAs and PC present valuable insight initially but do not explain how PC develops, and how SLBAs continue towards PC. According to the hierarchical progress in PCM, the level of attraction leads to attachment level, which leads to the level of allegiance. Thus, explaining the questions above require a mediation test.

By using attitude properties, (e.g., importance, knowledge and affect) (Funk and James, 2006) and brand trust (Filo et al., 2008) as a mediator and representative of attachment level, the attraction (brand associations)-attachment (attitude)-allegiance (loyalty) relationship within the PCM were empirically tested in sports team and fitness context. The results demonstrated that attitude properties and brand trust mediated the relationship between some brand associations and allegiance. However, the influence of fan identification as a representative of attachment on the PC, and the mediating role of fan identification on the relationship between the brand associations and the PC have not investigated in sports league context. As a result, based on the PCM and previous empirical results, we assert that the LFI may have a significant influence on the PC, and LFI may mediate the relationship between some SLBAs and PC. Hence, the following hypotheses were established.

H3: League fan identification has a significant influence on league consumers' psychological commitment to a sports league brand.

H4: League fan identification is a mediator between sports league brand associations and psychological commitment.

3. Material and Methods

3.1. Sample

The questionnaires were administered to spectators in four different TSFL matches in Ankara by the researcher and trained assistants. The research team settled around the six separate stadium gates of the host team and visitor team. Before the matches spectators were intercepted, informed, and asked if he or she wants to volunteer, and this convenience sampling method allowed any spectator attending the games were eligible to be surveyed (cf. Kim and Kim, 2009; Ko et al., 2011). A total of 305 questionnaires were collected, of which 284 were deemed usable for data analyses. Since ten or more items were answered consecutively with the same scale number (cf. Kim and Kim, 2009), 21 questionnaires were excluded from the study. The sample size was over the minimum recommended sample size of 200 for Structural equation modelling (SEM) with maximum likelihood estimation (Hair et al., 2006). Two hundred twenty-four of the participants were men (78,9%) and 60, of them were women (21,1%). The participants' average age was $M= 32,20$ $SD= 9,10$.

On the other hand, the mean scores of the responses have given by the participants to the 7-point Likert type scales, which measure the consumption frequency of the league according to their consumption behaviours, were as follows. "I watch the league's games in stadiums" $M= 3,26$ $SD= 2,00$; "I use the internet to get information on the league" $M= 4,71$ $SD= 2,02$; "I watch the league's games at home" $M= 4,40$ $SD= 1,93$; "I read newspaper articles about the league" $M= 4,53$ $SD= 1,94$. According to mean scores, it can be said that the participants are moderately interested in attending the games in stadiums, watching the games at home or following the news about the games on the internet and newspapers.

3.2. Measurement Instruments

Fifteen associations that were each measured by three items and a total of 45 items associations scale were prepared to measure the brand associations by reviewing the literature. SLBAs and measurement items were adapted from the studies of Gladden and Funk (2002), Kunkel et al. (2014b), Ross et al. (2008). Minor adaptations were made to questionnaire items to fit the research context. The entire SLBAs were measured with a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Friends and families have an important role for an individual's beginning, continue and cessation following a league and team (Wann et al.,1996), and approval of significant others for an individual's following a league and team shown directly influenced the individual's identification with a team (Wakefield, 1995). The psychological significance and the value attributed to this approval as a fan used in measuring fan identification in other sport studies (e.g. Boyle and Magnusson, 2007; Gladden and Funk, 2001; Kim and Kim, 2009; Wann and Bronscombe, 1993). So, following the same perspective, an item adapted from Gladden and Funk (2002) which is it is important that my friends and family see me as a fan of this league' to measure fan identification. Mahony et al. (2000) stated that resistance to change

was an essential element that could explain commitment and that loyal fans could be expected to show resistance to change (even though there may be a situation that could cause their preferences to change) and being insistent about the team they supported for a long time. In this study, a similar approach was also assimilated in the measurement of league consumers' PC. An item was adapted from Mahony et al. (2000) which is 'it would be difficult to change my beliefs about this league' to measure the PC. It was reported that measurement of the brand (Bergkvist and Rossiter, 2007), commitment and identification constructs (Kwon and Trail, 2005) with a single item could be equally valid with the measurement of the same constructs with multiple items, and acceptable where respondents may not dedicate much time on extensive surveys (Kunkel et al., 2014b). Single item measurement also has been used in various sports researches (e.g., Carlson et al., 2009; Fink et al., 2002; Kunkel et al., 2014b; Ridinger and Funk, 2006). Considering the administration method of the questionnaires and based on the previous usage of a single item with the same construct, it was considered suitable the use of the single item for these constructs on the purpose of this study. The LFI and PC were measured with a 7-point Likert-type scale (1= strongly disagree, 7= strongly agree). Also, to gain insight into participants' league consumption frequency according to the consumption behaviours, four items were asked (1= Never; 7= Always) as well as the questionnaires about the demographic information. The items which measure the frequency of consumption behaviours were adapted from Pritchard and Funk (2006).

3.3. Procedures

First, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed with reliable factors to test the structural validity of the multi-items SLBAs scale and secondly SEM was conducted to test the proposed relationships stated in hypotheses H1 to H4. According to the recent simulation studies and updated approaches to the mediation test (e.g. Hayes and Rockwood, 2016; Rucker et al., 2011; Zhao et al., 2010) the size of the total effect (c) does not determine the existence and the size of the indirect effect; the only requirement to demonstrate mediation is that whether the indirect effect is significant or not. Bootstrapping, a nonparametric resampling technique to estimate statistical parameters, standard errors and bias-corrected confidence intervals are offered best in testing mediation (Cheung, 2007; Preacher and Hayes, 2008; Zhao et al., 2010). Therefore, in this study, by following Zhao et al. (2010) in testing direct and indirect paths, the bootstrapping method and the corrected confidence intervals that have been used in the sports management field previously (e.g., Magnusen et al., 2012; Kunkel et al., 2017) will be used. In the study, descriptive statistics were conducted with SPSS 24 while CFA and SEM were done with the AMOS 24 statistical program.

4. Results

4.1. Confirmatory Factor Analysis

In reliability test, escape ($\alpha = ,73$), nostalgia ($\alpha = ,76$), star player ($\alpha = ,78$), league management ($\alpha = ,79$), product delivery ($\alpha = ,79$), rivalry ($\alpha = ,70$), specific team interest ($\alpha = ,77$), education ($\alpha = ,81$), stadium atmosphere ($\alpha = ,71$) and peer group acceptance ($\alpha = ,71$) were above the threshold point of $\geq ,70$ for Cronbach's alpha (Nunnally, 1978). Logo ($\alpha = ,65$), tradition ($\alpha = ,50$), competitive balance ($\alpha = ,68$), socialization ($\alpha = ,68$), game representation ($\alpha = ,65$) were below the threshold point of $\geq ,70$, hence they were eliminated from further analysis. As a result of the first CFA, which has done with reliable SLBAs, product delivery, rivalry and stadium atmosphere have had a high level of residual values of $> 2,58$ (Byrne, 2001) in the residual covariance matrix. Thus, these associations had to be removed from the model. Also, there were high correlations ($> ,90$) between the factors star player and specific team interest. In previous studies (e.g., Bauer et al., 2008; Gladden and Funk, 2002), these associations were classified as "attributes" under the second-order factor structure due to their description of the attribution of the product. Therefore, the decision was made to repeat the factor analysis by combining them (cf. Darmawan and Keeves, 2006) rather than removing (cf. Byrne, 2001) the variables so as not to cause loss of theoretical knowledge. Some items related to nostalgia (NOS1), management (MNG1), escape (ESC1), peer group acceptance (PGA2), and star player (STP3) were removed as cross-loaded on other factors, also. Finally, the results of a few of iterative analyses by CFA showed that six brand associations with 16 items were the best candidates for assessing SLBAs. When checked before the CFA, the multivariate normality violated (Mardia's multivariate kurtosis: 281,048 critical ratio: 50,767). So, the parameters obtained from CFA and SEM were evaluated compared to the 5000 re-sampling for the 95% corrected confidence interval in the bootstrapping method as suggested by Byrne, (2001) and Preacher and Hayes, (2008). The global fit indices indicated acceptable fit to data: $\chi^2/df = 1,928$ ($\chi^2 = 171,598$; $df = ,89$) was $\leq 3,00$ (Kline, 2005); SRMR = ,049 was $\leq ,05$ (Byrne, 2001); GFI = ,929; TLI = ,938; NFI = ,911, and CFI = ,954 were $\geq ,90$ (Kline, 2005); RMSEA = ,057 was $\leq ,08$ (Hair et al., 2006). The CFA results were given in Table 1. All items were above $\geq ,50$ (Hair et al., 2006), regarding item-total correlation and factor loadings. All regression coefficients were found significant ($p < ,05$ two-tailed). For CR, all factors had the suggested cut-off value of $\geq ,70$ (Nunnally, 1978). Another criterion of convergent validity is that the AVE for each factor should be $\geq ,50$ (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). AVE ranged from a minimum of ,53 to a maximum of ,66. This score shows the internal consistency of the structure. Since all squared correlations between the factors were lower than the AVE of the factors, discriminant validity is supported (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). In Table 2, correlations and squared correlations between the factors, the AVE scores and CR were given.

Table 1: Confirmatory factor analysis results

Associations / Items	ITTC	ML	Bootstrapping Estimation (with 500 resampling)		
			β	β^{mean}	S.E
	$\geq ,50$	β $\geq ,50$	β^{mean} $\geq ,50$		
Escape					
ESC2	,581	,954*	,977	,143	,778 / 1,320
ESC3 ^a	,581	,610	,606	,087	,400 / ,750
Nostalgia					
NOS3 ^a	,568	,814*	,818	,055	,708 / ,923
NOS2	,568	,698	,697	,053	,584 / ,794
League Management					
MNG2	,604	,784*	,786	,068	,641 / ,909
MNG3 ^a	,604	,770	,772	,062	,637 / ,885
Peer Group Acceptance					
PGA1	,566	,712*	,706	,068	,578 / ,844
PGA3	,566	,794	,806	,068	,668 / ,924
Education					
EDU1	,659	,785*	,784	,039	,701 / ,854
EDU2	,701	,819*	,819	,033	,746 / ,879
EDU3 ^a	,634	,704	,704	,048	,596 / ,787
Stars-Teams					
Specific team-ST1	,659	,737*	,737	,040	,653 / ,809
Specific team-ST2 ^a	,650	,743	,742	,041	,656 / ,818
Specific team-ST3	,644	,692*	,693	,045	,591 / ,769
Stars-STP1	,652	,711*	,714	,042	,622 / ,785
Stars-STP2	,698	,760*	,759	,041	,668 / ,832

^aFactor loadings were fixed to the value of 1,0; **ITTC**: item to total correlation; **ML**: maximum likelihood estimation; β : original sample estimates of standardized regression weights; * $P < ,001$; β^{mean} : bootstrapped estimates of standardized regression weights; **SE**: standard error of bootstrapped estimates; **BCPM**: Bias corrected percentile method; **CI**: confidence intervals.

Table 2: Correlations, average variance extracted and composite reliability scores

Factors	1	2	3	4	5	7	AVE	CR
							$\geq ,50$	$\geq ,70$
Escape	1,00						,66	,79
Nostalgia	,508 (,258)	1,00					,58	,73
League management	,262 (,069)	,263 (,069)	1,00				,61	,76
Peer group acceptance	,053 (,003)	,356 (,127)	,542 (,294)	1,00			,57	,73
Education	,480 (,230)	,705 (,497)	,387 (,150)	,416 (,173)	1,00		,59	,81
Stars-Teams	,693 (,480)	,693 (,480)	,139 (,019)	,356 (,127)	,721 (,520)	1,00	,53	,85

AVE: average variance extracted; **CR**: composite reliability; correlation values are the mean correlation values obtained from 5000 bootstrapped re-sampling result. The values in parentheses are squared correlations.

4.2. Structural Equation Modelling

Since the influence of each brand association on fan identification and psychological commitment will be examined separately, the following sub-hypotheses were established concerning the H1 and H2 as a result of CFA.

The associations escape (H1a), nostalgia (H1b), league management (H1c), peer group acceptance (H1d), education (H1e), stars-teams (H1f) have a significant influence on the league consumers' identification to a sports league brand. The associations escape (H2a), nostalgia (H2b), league management (H2c), peer group acceptance (H2d), education (H2e), stars-teams (H2f) have a significant influence on the league consumers' psychological commitment to a sports league brand.

The proposed structural equation modelling achieved adequate fit to data. $\chi^2 / df = 2,093$ ($\chi^2 = 228,172$; $df = 109$) was $\leq 3,00$ (Kline, 2005). SRMR = ,047 was $\leq ,05$ (Byrne, 2001). GFI = ,919; TLI = ,921; NFI = ,900 and CFI = ,944 were $\geq ,90$ (Kline, 2005). RMSEA = ,062 was $\leq ,08$ (Hair et al., 2006). Figure 1 shows the results of the proposed relationships in this study. The direct regression coefficients between escape and LFI (H1a) $\beta^{mean} = ,164$; $p < ,05$; between nostalgia and LFI (H1b) $\beta^{mean} = ,376$; $p < ,01$; between peer group acceptance and LFI (H1d) $\beta^{mean} = ,299$; $p < ,001$) were significant and positive. The direct regression coefficients between league management (H1c), education (H1e), stars-teams (H1f) and LFI were not significant ($p > ,05$). The direct regression coefficient between nostalgia and PC (H2b) was significant and positive ($\beta^{mean} = ,420$; $p < ,01$). However, the direct regression coefficients between escape (H2a), league management (H2c), peer group acceptance (H2d), education (H2e), stars-teams (H2f) and PC were not significant ($p > ,05$). Also, the direct regression coefficient between LFI and PC (H3) was significant and positive ($\beta^{mean} = ,258$; $p < ,001$). The model accounted for 44 % of LFI and 49 % of PC. All the results related to the SEM were presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Structural equation modelling results

Hypotheses	ML		Bootstrapping Estimation (with 5000 re-sampling)				Result
	β	β^{mean}	SE	BCPM	95 % CI low / CI high		
H1 = Brand Associations → Fan identification							
H1a = Escape - Identification	,172*	,164	,091		,007/ ,360	S	
H1b = Nostalgia - Identification	,361**	,376	,148		,057/ ,641	S	
H1c = League management - Identification	,045	,049	,101		-,172/ ,224	NS	
H1d = Peer group acceptance - Identification	,305***	,299	,110		,092/ ,541	S	
H1e = Education - Identification	-,029	-,033	,132		-,323/ ,201	NS	
H1f = Stars/Teams - Identification	,029	,028	,118		-,203/ ,259	NS	
H2 = Brand Associations → Psychological commitment							
H2a = Escape - Commitment	-,113	-,110	,096		-,336/ ,033	NS	
H2b = Nostalgia - Commitment	,404**	,420	,190		,081/ ,817	S	
H2c = League management - Commitment	,137	,127	,091		-,031/ ,325	NS	
H2d = Peer group acceptance - Commitment	-,112	-,098	,125		-,397/ ,110	NS	
H2e = Education - Commitment	,252*	,249	,136		-,026/ ,523	NS	
H2f = Stars/Team - Commitment	-,062	-,075	,120		-,321/ ,148	NS	

H3 = Fan identification	→ Psychological commitment				
H3a = Fan identification - Commitment	,265***	.258	.082	.102/ .421	S
H4 = Indirect Relationships					
Escape – Identification - Commitment	,045*	,030	,004/ ,132		S
Nostalgia – Identification - Commitment	,096**	,046	,033/ ,215		S
League management – Identification - Commitment	,012	,028	-,042/ ,069		NS
Peer group acceptance – Identification - Commitment	,081**	,042	,23/ ,204		S
Education – Identification - Commitment	-,008	,036	-,097/ ,054		NS
Stars/Teams – Identification - Commitment	,008	,033	-,048/ ,085		NS

ML: Maximum likelihood estimation; β : original sample estimates of standardized regression weights; *: $P < .05$; **: $P < .01$; ***: $P < .001$; β_{mean} : bootstrapped estimates of standardized regression weights; SE: standard error of bootstrapped estimates; BCPM: Bias corrected percentile method; CI: confidence intervals; S: supported; NS: not supported.

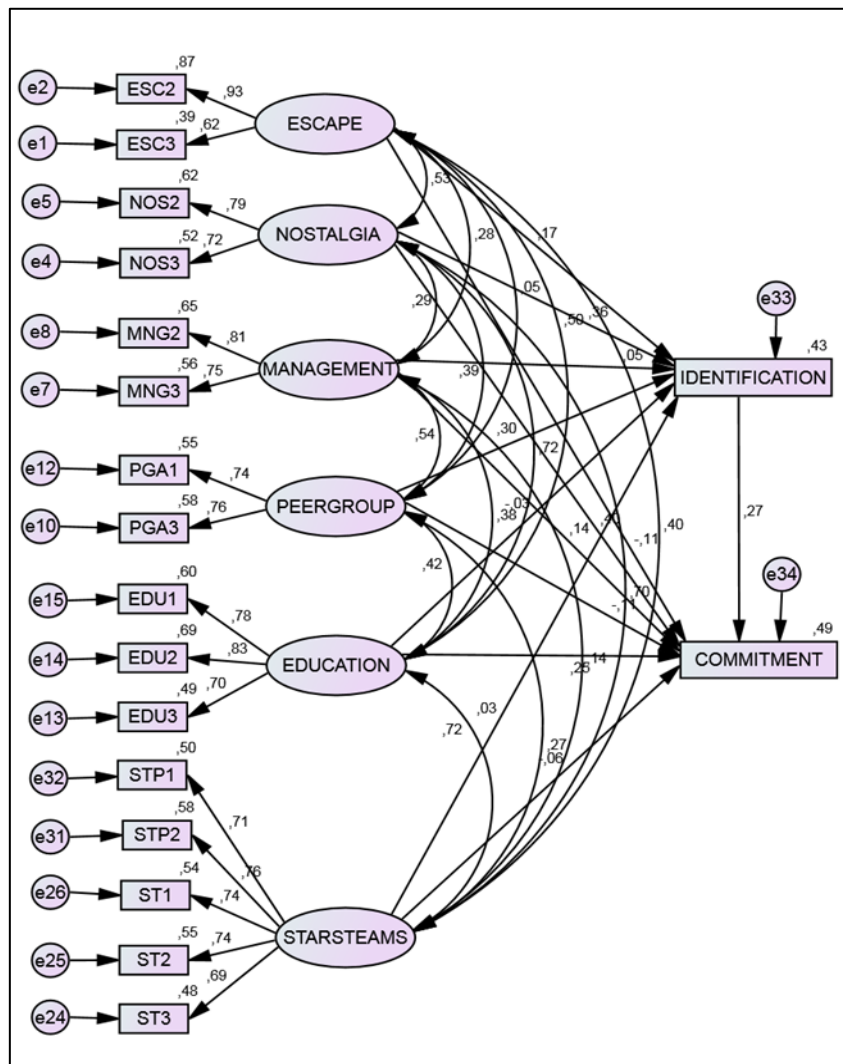


Figure 1: Structural model: The relationships between league brand associations, league fan identification and psychological commitment

According to Preacher and Hayes (2008) and Zhao et al. (2010), full mediation can be claimed on the condition that a non-significant direct path from the independent variable to the dependent variable exists simultaneously with a significant indirect path; however, partial mediation can be claimed if the indirect and direct paths exist and significant simultaneously. In regarding mediation relationships (H4), escape had not significant direct effect on PC ($\beta^{\text{mean}} = -.110$; $p > .05$); however, it has significant indirect effect on PC via LFI ($\beta^{\text{mean}} = .45$; $p < .05$). Similarly, peer group acceptance had not significant direct effect on PC ($\beta^{\text{mean}} = -.098$; $p > .05$); however, it has significant indirect effect on PC via LFI ($\beta^{\text{mean}} = .81$; $p < .01$). So, escape and peer group acceptance fully mediated the relationship between associations and commitment. Lastly, nostalgia had both significant direct effect ($\beta^{\text{mean}} = .420$; $p < .001$), and indirect effect ($\beta^{\text{mean}} = .096$; $p < .01$) on PC via LFI with lower size relative to the direct effect. So, nostalgia partially mediated the relationship between associations and commitment.

5. Discussion

In the first part of the study, the validity and reliability of multi-items SLBAs have been examined within an open competition formatted league in the case of the TSFL. Nostalgia, escape, management, peer group acceptance, stars-teams and education were strongly related as core brand associations by the league consumers. Having associated of the nostalgia with the league brand shows that fond memories and pleasant feelings experienced in the past with friends and family about the league were seen as essential elements of a league brand from the consumers' perspective. The activities such as watching the league, reading and talking about the league might help league consumers forget their daily problems or coping with them, and this makes escape a critical element of a league brand. The management has a vital role in building trust between consumers and an organization (Fornier, 1998), which explains why management is an important association for league consumers. Friends and families are significant social agents for an individual (Wann et al., 1996). Thus, following a sports league with friends or families make peer group acceptance a critical element of the league. The players and teams, unlike the team context, appear to have taken one place in the mind of the league consumers as a whole when asked a league. Star players with their outstanding performances and individual interest in a specific team make the league more attractive to the sports consumers (Gladden and Funk, 2002; Kunkel et al., 2014b). For example, consumers follow La Liga and EPL as well as the local leagues because of their interest in globalized teams such as Barcelona and Manchester United and their stars. Education, which represents whether a league can provide benefit for its followers by presenting knowledge gaining opportunities (Kunkel et al., 2014b), was significantly related as a brand association by the league consumers.

There are significant similarities and differences between the results of the study on brand associations conducted in closed competition formatted leagues (Kunkel et al., 2017) and the results of this study conducted in an open competition formatted league.

First, escape, nostalgia and team have significantly and positively associated with the league brand in both studies. Second, while league management and star player were positively associated with the open competition formatted league brand in this study, they were negatively associated with the closed competition formatted league brand in the other study (e.g., Kunkel et al., 2017). Third, peer group acceptance and education positively associated in this study, but peer group acceptance was not identified as a brand association, and education did not significantly associate in the study of Kunkel et al. (2017). Fourth, rivalry, socialization, and atmosphere positively associated in the study of Kunkel et al. (2017), but they had to be excluded from this study because they could not provide reliability (e.g. socialization) and validity (e.g., rival, atmosphere). The perception of the strength, direction and significance of each league SLBA by both league consumers may be attributed to the context of the studies, that is, the characteristics and the structure of the leagues, and the different consumption cultures of the consumers (e.g., Daniels et al., 2019; Kunkel et al., 2017).

In the second part of the study, the hypotheses of the research were examined to investigate the mediating role of LFI on the relationship between SLBAs and PC. Regarding Hypothesis 1, escape (H1a), nostalgia (H1b) and peer group acceptance (H1d) significantly and positively influenced to LFI. This results support PCM (Funk and James, 2001), and align with the similar studies which highlighted the importance of affiliation reasons like peer group acceptance (Sutton et al., 1997; Wakefield, 1995; Wann et al., 1996), social interaction, escape, drama and family (Fink et al., 2002) for fan identification in the sports team context. League management (H1c), education (H1e) and stars-teams (H1f) did not influence to LFI. By following a sports league, the individual can avoid stress; therefore, the sports league will provide a functional benefit (e.g., escape) for this individual towards his or her personal need. The sports league will provide an experiential (emotional) benefit for an individual, as it reminds him or her of the aspirations about friendships (e.g., nostalgia). Another example is that an individual can be nicely welcomed by a group of people in a social environment because of following a league they follow, and this enables he or she interacts with others (peer group acceptance). Therefore, by following a league, an individual establishes a position in the social environment, obtains a social identity that is part of the self-concept, and satisfies the need for belonging as part of his or her social need (e.g., Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Fisher and Wakefield, 1998). Peer group acceptance had a negative relationship with the outcomes related to team settings among the highly committed fans (Doyle et al., 2013; Gladden and Funk, 2001). Interestingly, in the case of a sports league, peer group acceptance has been shown essential for the moderate fans in this paper, as proposed by Gladden and Funk (2001). Shortly, it has been shown empirically that nostalgia, escape, and peer group acceptance, and the satisfaction of assumed personal and social needs underlying these associations by a league brand have an essential role in the identification process of sports league consumers with the league brand.

Findings related to Hypothesis 2 only supported the strong significant and positive influence of nostalgia (H2b) on PC. This result supports the PCM (Funk and

James, 2001), and aligns with similar previous studies on team context in which the significant positive relationship between nostalgia and loyalty were found (Doyle et al., 2013; Funk and James, 2006; Filo et al., 2008; Gladden and Funk, 2001), and with the study on league context that revealed a positive correlation between nostalgia and PC (Kunkel and Funk, 2014b). Spectator sports consumption is described mostly experiential and emotional (Gladden and Funk, 2002). So, the fact that nostalgia as an experiential benefit of league consumption predicted PC also supports the notion that sport consumers only take perceptions and memories from attending a sporting event (Gladden et al., 1998). Thus, it is understandable that nostalgia has a strong and positive direct influence on PC of league consumers toward their favourite league. Escape (H2a), league management (H2c), peer group acceptance (H2d), education (H2e) and stars-teams (H2f), however, did not influence to PC. It is thought that an individual who links attending in a league game only with hedonic needs or the opportunity to socialize with friends or diverging from their daily problems will also tend to consider other alternatives (e. g. cinema, concert) unless they do strongly link the associations related to expected values with the league brand (e.g., Doyle et al., 2013). This opinion may explain why escape and peer group acceptance did not influence the PC directly, by also considering the sample of this study that is composed of moderate fans.

Finding related to Hypothesis H3 supported the strong and positive influence of LFI on PC. This result supports to PCM (Funk and James, 2001) and aligns with studies on sports team context (Doyle et al., 2013) and with other contexts in marketing (Brown et al., 2005; Tuškej et al., 2013). According to this result, to the degree which the league allows a league consumer fan results in the higher the fans sense of resistance to change and enduring desire to maintain the valued relationship with the league (c.f. Brown et al., 2005; Funk and James, 2006). Findings related to Hypothesis H4 partially supported the mediation of LFI (as an attachment) on the relationship between SLBAs and PC. These results support the PCM (Funk and James, 2001) and align with similar studies which supported PCM by using other representatives of attachment as a mediator between brand associations and loyalty in the sports team (Funk and James, 2006) and fitness context (Filo et al., 2008). The LFI fully mediated the development of PC when considering escape and peer group acceptance. It seems that if a spectator integrates the associations of escape and peer group acceptance with his or her self-concept (identification) by strongly perceiving and valuing, and the league brand satisfies the spectator's need to belonging (e.g., group acceptance) and his or her some functional needs (e.g., escaping), the spectator would be a psychologically committed fan to a league, as a result of being identified through internalization. On the other hand, the LFI partially mediated the development of PC when considering nostalgia which means that nostalgia also influenced the PC of sport league consumers independently beyond the LFI. Because TSFL is a highly established league with a rich history, the TSFL consumers may have accumulated many memories and feelings about the league over many years. So, the reason why association of nostalgia positively and strongly influenced both LFI and PC can be attributed to the context of this study.

6. Recommendations

Significant findings were presented in this study for sports league managers that could contribute to better management and economic success of a sports league brand. Sports league managers can base SLBAs revealed in this study to be used for a more targeted and tailored marketing plan for fan identification and commitment of sport league consumers toward their league brand. It has been shown to the league managers that the perception of the strength, direction, and significance of each SLBA by consumers may vary depending on the context and characteristics of the league. Hence, the differences should be taken into consideration in the league brand image management. In the context of TSFL, as an open competition formatted leagues, the four of the six brand associations strongly identified by the league consumers were related to the benefit dimension (nostalgia, escape, peer group acceptance, education) whereas two of them related to the attribute dimension of brand associations (stars-teams, league management). That is, the TSFL has been successful in linking these associations positively to its brand. Furthermore, the SLBAs which influenced both fan identification and PC of sports league consumers toward the league were all benefit associations. So, it seems relatively more important to the league managers to use attribute associations such as star players' skills, specific teams' performances and reliability of league management for attracting new consumers (e.g., Funk and James, 2006). However, benefit associations like nostalgia, escape and peer group acceptance more related highly identified and committed fans since the benefits are more salient as the lifespan of consumers and a league develops (e.g., Daniels et al., 2019; Lock et al., 2012), as in the case of TSFL. Using benefits is more reasonable to retain this segment. Therefore, sports league managers should not focus merely on attraction related associations for positioning, but they should also focus on benefit associations which may satisfy consumers' personal and social needs.

The results of the study suggest that efforts to nurture and maintain a long-term consumers-league brand relationship, which is based on commitment, require enhancing LFI primarily. So, the associations like the nostalgia, escape, peer group acceptance and LFI construct are essential to be manipulated and to be satisfied by sport league managers, specifically for the managers of TSFL. For example, league managers should focus on activities that will allow league consumers to have good memories in their minds. They can strength other associations that may be closely related to the nostalgia, such as tradition, which is including the history of the league and product delivery which is including other entertaining activities for the spectators during games. Specific drivers that can evoke nostalgic thoughts in the consumers' mind should be explored (Gladden and Funk, 2001). Opportunities should be provided to diversion from routine life for consumers. For example, the web site of the league could be used more efficiently by integrating memorable and updated videos from the games, press conferences, fantasy leagues and fantasy draft which are very popular among fans could be supported. League managers can leverage LFI by providing special access to players, coaches, league executives for making strongly identified fans feel like part of the league, and

communicating with the fans through email, mail, telephone message can reinforce committed consumers feel special as a fan (e.g., Gladden and Funk, 2001). Specifically, for the TSFL, the league related merchandise and licensed products should be created and diversified, which have not promoted efficiently so far. Also, the league museums can be promoted more efficiently, and fan events like fans tournaments should provide contact opportunities among fans.

7. Future Directions and Limitations

This study has some limitations and future directions. First, since the multi-items SLBAs would be tested for the first time, the associations used in this study have been derived from the adaptation of previously used team and SLBAs. So, in the future studies, other unique SLBAs that can be obtained by the method of the free-thought listing should be brought out from open competition formatted sports league consumers. Second, although the associations such as product delivery, rivalry, stadium atmosphere, competitive balance, socialization, game representation, logo and tradition rated above the mid-point of the 1-7 Likert scale, which indicates that the respondents agreed to the existence of these associations (cf. Kunkel et al., 2017), however, they could not use in brand association measurement model because of the psychometrical issue. So, future research should revise and re-test these associations, which may be important for LFI, PC and different consumption behaviors of sports league consumers. Third, due to the increased number of questions in the survey because of the intention to test of multi-items league brand association, and also to prevent the difficulties might cause by collecting the data face-to-face with the consumers around the stadium, LFI and PC were measured with a single item. Although a single-item measure of a brand constructs, identification and commitment have been preferred by various sport researchers (e.g., Fink et al., 2002; Kunkel et al., 2014b) and acceptable from practical advantages (Bergkvist and Rossiter, 2007), future research should consider multiple dimensions of these construct. Fourth, investigating possible moderators of the proposed relationship like involvement, gender, social class, and multiple group differences would be crucial future research in this context. Fifth, because the convenience sampling method was used and the data obtained from the spectators attending the matches in the stadium, the results might be biased, so requires caution in terms of the only internet or TV game viewers.

8. Conclusion

This study addressed the calls for the need to increase instrument validity and reliability of SLBAs through multiple items and to investigate the strength of each league brand association on consumers' attitude and loyalty by using SEM (e.g., Kunkel et al., 2014b), as well as the generalizability of associations in open competition formatted leagues (e.g., Kunkel et al., 2017). In addition, based on the PCM (Funk and James, 2006), the mediating role of LFI on the relationship between SLBAs and PC was investigated. Six brand

association dimensions with sixteen items were identified. It was also found that LFI is a critical psychological connection in the development of PC of league consumers, and a mediator between the SLBAs of nostalgia, escape, and peer group acceptance and PC. This study advanced the SLBA literature by validating the multi-items SLBAs and examining their influence on LFI and PC, beyond the linkages, in an open competition formatted leagues. This study also extended the attraction-attachment-allegiance relationships inquiry in the PCM in sports team context by investigating the mediating role of LFI as a representative of attachment in sports league context.

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Appendix A: League Brand Associations, Definitions, and Sources

Association	Definition	Source
Escape	Following a sports league allow an individual to get away from his routines.	Gladden and Funk, 2002
Nostalgia	The league experience reminds good memories related to the league.	
Product delivery	Refers the ability of a league to satisfy the desire of entertainment of its consumers, and activities displayed by the teams and attendees in the stadium.	
Peer group acceptance	Implies that watching a league offers to a person to be accepted in a social environment.	
Stadium atmosphere	The sharing of the consumers their sporting experience together in the stadium environment contributes to a league's become pleasurable.	Kunkel, Funk, and King, 2014
Education	Education refers to the capacity of sports informing and teaching new things.	
Rivalry	Historical rivalries among certain teams contribute to the attractiveness and enjoyment of the leagues.	
League management	Refers to the importance of the reliability of league managers who have the authority to make decisions about administrative affairs in the league.	
Competitive balance	The competitive balance between league teams contributes to the attractiveness of the league.	
Game representation	Refers to one's special interest in a particular sport and the league's representation of that sport.	
Specific team interest	The presence of and interesting in a specific team contributes to the enjoyment of the league.	
Socialization	Explains that sport helps people to interact with others.	
Tradition	Represents historical past and significant achievements in the league.	Gladden and Funk, 2002; Kunkel, Funk, and King, 2014
Star player	Outstanding players contribute to the attractiveness and enjoyment of sports league.	
Logo	Logo, symbols, and colours reinforce the image by providing insight into quality standards.	Kunkel, Funk and King, 2014; Ross, Russell, Bang, 2008

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