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University Students' Brand Associations Toward Football Teams: The Case of Adıyaman University

"Üniversite Öğrencilerinin Futbol Takımlarına Yönelik Marka Çağrışımları: Adıyaman Üniversitesi Örneği"

Süleyman BİLGİN[1] & Eren BOZYILAN[2]

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Authors Communications
1-(Corresponding Author) Adiyaman University, Faculty of Sports Sciences, Department of Coaching Education., Adıyaman, TÜRKİYE.
e-mail: sbilgin@adiyaman.edu.tr
https://orcid.org/0009-0000-7933-2400
2- Adiyaman University, Faculty of Sports Sciences, Department of Coaching Education., Adıyaman, TÜRKİYE.
e-mail:ebozyilan@adiyaman.edu.tr
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8450-880X

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ABSTRACT

Aim: In contemporary sport markets, football teams increasingly function as powerful consumer brands that generate emotional, symbolic, and social meanings for their supporters. Understanding how fans perceive these brand associations has therefore become an important issue in sport marketing research. Although previous studies have examined fan identification and sport consumption behaviors, limited research has focused on the multidimensional structure of football team brand associations and whether these perceptions vary according to demographic characteristics. Therefore, this study aimed to examine football fans' perceptions of team brand associations and investigate potential differences according to selected demographic variables.
Material and Method: This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional design. Data were collected from 310 university students studying in different faculties of a public university in Türkiye through a structured questionnaire. The survey included a demographic information form and the Football Team Brand Associations Scale consisting of 33 items measured on a five-point Likert scale. The scale evaluates several dimensions such as team success, coach image, star players, management, club history, stadium characteristics, visual identity, psychological escape, identification, and socialization. Data were analyzed using SPSS with descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, Pearson correlation analysis, independent samples t-tests, and one-way ANOVA.
Results: Participants reported moderately positive perceptions of football team brand associations (M = 3.74, SD = 0.52). The overall reliability of the scale was high (Cronbach's α = .93). Correlation analysis revealed positive and moderate relationships among several brand association dimensions. However, no statistically significant differences were found according to gender or football interest level.
Conclusion: Football team brand associations appear to be shaped mainly by psychological and social perceptions rather than demographic characteristics. These findings contribute to sport marketing literature and provide practical insights for sport organizations aiming to strengthen brand equity and fan engagement strategies.

Keywords: Brand Associations, Football Fans, Sport Branding, Sport Marketing, Team İdentification.

ÖZET

Amaç: Çağdaş spor pazarlarında, futbol kulüpleri giderek taraftarları için duygusal, sembolik ve sosyal anlamlar üreten güçlü tüketici markaları olarak işlev görmektedir. Bu nedenle, taraftarların bu marka çağrışımlarını nasıl algıladığını anlamak, spor pazarlama araştırmalarında önemli bir konu haline gelmiştir. Önceki çalışmalar taraftar özdeşleşmesi ve spor tüketim davranışlarını incelemiş olsa da, futbol takımı marka çağrışımlarının çok boyutlu yapısına ve bu algıların demografik özelliklere göre değişip değişmediğine odaklanan sınırlı sayıda araştırma bulunmaktadır. Bu nedenle, bu çalışma futbol taraftarlarının takım marka çağrışımlarına ilişkin algılarını incelemeyi ve seçilen demografik değişkenlere göre potansiyel farklılıkları araştırmayı amaçlamıştır.
Materyal ve Metod: Bu çalışma, nicel kesitsel bir tasarım kullanmıştır. Veriler, Türkiye'deki bir devlet üniversitesinin farklı fakültelerinde öğrenim gören 310 üniversite öğrencisinden yapılandırılmış bir anket aracılığıyla toplanmıştır. Anket, demografik bilgi formu ve beş puanlık Likert ölçeğinde ölçülen 33 maddeden oluşan Futbol Takımı Marka Çağrışımları Ölçeği'ni içermiştir. Ölçek, takım başarısı, teknik direktör imajı, yıldız oyuncular, yönetim, kulüp tarihi, stadyum özellikleri, görsel kimlik, psikolojik kaçış, özdeşleşme ve sosyalleşme gibi çeşitli boyutları değerlendirmektedir. Veriler, SPSS kullanılarak tanımlayıcı istatistikler, güvenilirlik analizi, Pearson korelasyon analizi, bağımsız örneklem t-testleri ve tek yönlü ANOVA ile analiz edildi.
Bulgular: Katılımcılar, futbol takımı marka çağrışımlarına ilişkin orta düzeyde olumlu algılar bildirdiler (Ortalama = 3,74, Standart Sapma = 0,52). Ölçeğin genel güvenilirliği yüksekti (Cronbach'ın α = 0,93). Korelasyon analizi, çeşitli marka çağrışım boyutları arasında pozitif ve orta düzeyde ilişkiler ortaya koydu. Bununla birlikte, cinsiyete veya futbol ilgi düzeyine göre istatistiksel olarak anlamlı farklılıklar bulunmadı.
Sonuç: Futbol takımı marka çağrışımlarının, demografik özelliklerden ziyade esas olarak psikolojik ve sosyal algılar tarafından şekillendirildiği görülmektedir. Bu bulgular, spor pazarlama literatürüne katkıda bulunmakta ve marka değerini ve taraftar katılım stratejilerini güçlendirmeyi amaçlayan spor organizasyonları için pratik bilgiler sağlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Futbol Taraftarları, Marka Çağrışımları, Spor Markalaşması, Spor Pazarlaması, Takım Kimliği.

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary sport markets, football teams compete not only through athletic performance but also through their ability to establish strong and meaningful brands. Professional sports organizations increasingly operate as brand entities that aim to build long-term relationships with fans and maintain competitive advantages in global sport markets (Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020; Mansouri et al., 2024). Within this context, sports teams are no longer perceived solely as competitive units but as brands that generate emotional, symbolic, and social meanings for their supporters.

Brand associations represent one of the most important components of sport brand equity because they reflect the set of perceptions, meanings, and emotions that consumers connect with a particular sport team. These associations may emerge from multiple sources such as team performance, star players, club history, stadium atmosphere, and social experiences associated with fandom (Bodet et al., 2020; Palau-Saumell et al., 2022). In football contexts, brand associations often extend beyond functional product attributes and incorporate symbolic meanings that reinforce fans' emotional attachment to their teams.

Recent sport marketing research has emphasized the central role of fan–team relationships in shaping brand-related perceptions. In particular, team identification has been widely recognized as one of the most influential psychological constructs explaining sport consumption behaviors. Highly identified fans tend to perceive the team as part of their self-concept and therefore demonstrate stronger emotional and behavioral engagement with the team (Kwon et al., 2022; Lintumäki & Koll, 2024). Empirical evidence shows that team identification has significant effects on sport consumption behaviors such as match attendance, merchandise purchase intentions, and media engagement.

In addition to identification processes, recent studies have highlighted the importance of relational and personality-based factors in shaping sport brand perceptions. Research indicates that both fan personality traits and brand personality attributes can influence the development of fan–brand relationships, including dimensions such as commitment, emotional connection, and nostalgia (Mosaad et al., 2022; Palau-Saumell et al., 2022). These relational mechanisms strengthen the psychological bond between fans and sport organizations, contributing to the formation of stable brand associations.

Another important dimension of sport brand associations involves social interaction and community formation. Football fandom is inherently social, as fans often experience matches collectively and share emotional experiences with other supporters. Studies have shown that fan communities and social interactions play a crucial role in reinforcing sport brand meanings and strengthening loyalty (Ahiabor et al., 2023; Mills et al., 2022). These collective experiences contribute to the development of social identity among fans and enhance their attachment to the team.

Recent literature also highlights that sports teams function as social identity groups that enable individuals to express belonging and group membership. According to social identity-based approaches, individuals derive part of their self-concept from their affiliation with social groups such as sports teams (Lintumäki & Koll, 2024; Takamatsu, 2021). As a result, the psychological relationship between fans and football teams becomes a key driver of both emotional attachment and consumption behavior.

Furthermore, the digital transformation of sport consumption has significantly expanded the ways in which fans interact with sports teams and develop brand associations. Social networking platforms

enable fans to communicate with teams and other supporters, thereby strengthening emotional engagement and reinforcing sport brand equity (Ahiabor et al., 2023; Kwon et al., 2022). Digital environments also allow sport organizations to cultivate global fan communities, which further enhances the symbolic value of sport brands. In this digital context, it is noteworthy that for populations with a strong athletic identity, such as sports-oriented students, finding meaning through physical culture can act as a regulatory mechanism for digital habits, potentially serving as a protective factor against problematic smartphone use and digital dependency (Şahin & Öner, 2026).

Another important factor influencing football brand perceptions is the broader reputation and credibility of sport organizations. Research suggests that elements such as corporate social responsibility, brand credibility, and organizational reputation can positively influence fans' attitudes and patronage intentions toward football teams (Mansouri et al., 2024; Takamatsu, 2021). These findings demonstrate that football brand equity is shaped not only by athletic performance but also by broader organizational and reputational signals.

Despite the growing body of literature on sport branding, several gaps remain. Many existing studies have focused primarily on fan identification and consumption behaviors, while relatively fewer studies have examined the multidimensional structure of football team brand associations in a comprehensive manner (Bodet et al., 2020; Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020). In particular, limited research has explored how different dimensions of brand associations—such as team success, star players, management quality, club history, visual identity, identification, and socialization—jointly shape fans' perceptions of football teams.

Understanding these multidimensional perceptions is particularly important among university students. University students represent an important segment of sport consumers who actively engage with football through both traditional and digital channels. Their perceptions of football team brands may influence long-term patterns of fan loyalty and sport consumption (Kwon et al., 2022; Mills et al., 2022).

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine university students' perceptions of football team brand associations and to explore whether these perceptions differ according to selected demographic variables. By investigating these relationships, the present study aims to contribute to the growing literature on sport branding and fan behavior while providing insights for sport organizations seeking to strengthen their brand strategies and fan engagement.

Research Hypotheses:

- ✓ H1: Football team brand association perceptions differ according to gender.
- ✓ H2: Football team brand association perceptions differ according to football interest level.
- ✓ H3: Positive relationships exist among the dimensions of football team brand associations.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Ethical Considerations

Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee of Adıyaman University (Approval Date: 03 March 2026; Decision No: 48). The research procedures were conducted in accordance with ethical standards for research involving human

participants.All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and informed consent was obtained before participation. The questionnaire was anonymous, and no personally identifiable information was collected. The data obtained from the participants were used solely for scientific purposes and were treated confidentially throughout the research process.

Study Design

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional research design to examine university students' perceptions of football team brand associations related to their supported teams. A survey-based approach was used to collect data from university students who actively follow football. The study aimed to investigate the structure of football team brand associations and to explore whether these perceptions differ according to selected demographic variables.

A descriptive and correlational research model was adopted. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize participants' responses, while inferential statistical analyses were conducted to identify relationships among variables and differences across demographic groups.

Participants

The sample of the study consisted of 310 university students enrolled in different faculties of Adıyaman University in Türkiye. Participants were selected using a non-probability convenience sampling method, which is widely used in social science research when access to the population is limited.

The participants represented various academic disciplines including Health Sciences, Sport Sciences, Engineering, Education, Business and Economics, and Science-Letters. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 35 years, with a mean age of approximately 22 years.

The sample included 156 male (50.3%) and 154 female (49.7%) participants. In terms of football interest, the majority of participants reported high or very high levels of interest in football, and most indicated that they regularly followed football matches.

Data Collection Instruments

In this study, data were collected using two instruments: a Personal Information Form and the Football Team Brand Associations Scale developed by Yıldız (2016).

The Personal Information Form was prepared by the researchers to obtain demographic information about the participants. The form included questions regarding age, gender, faculty of study, level of interest in football, supported football team, and frequency of following football matches.

The second instrument used in the study was the Football Team Brand Associations Scale, which was originally developed by Yıldız (2016) to measure fans' perceptions of brand associations related to football teams. The scale consists of 33 items measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The scale measures multiple dimensions of brand associations associated with football teams, including team success, coach image, star players, management, club history, stadium characteristics,

visual identity, psychological escape, fan identification, and socialization opportunities. Higher scores obtained from the scale indicate stronger brand associations with the supported football team.

Demographic Information Form: The first section of the questionnaire consisted of a demographic information form designed to obtain background information about the participants. The form included questions regarding age, gender, faculty of study, level of interest in football, supported football team, and frequency of following football matches. These variables were collected to examine whether perceptions of football team brand associations differed across demographic groups.

Football Team Brand Associations Scale: The second section of the questionnaire consisted of the Football Team Brand Associations Scale developed to assess fans' perceptions of football team brand associations. The scale includes 33 items rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The instrument measures multiple dimensions of football team brand associations, including team success, coach image, star players, management, club history, stadium characteristics, visual identity, psychological escape, fan identification, and socialization opportunities. Higher scores indicate stronger brand associations with the supported football team. Prior to the analyses, one negatively worded item related to the club history dimension was reverse coded to ensure consistency in score interpretation.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and were asked to complete the survey voluntarily. The questionnaires were administered in classroom environments and through online forms. Participants completed the survey individually, and the average completion time was approximately 8–10 minutes. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were free to withdraw from the study at any stage.

Common Method Bias

Since all data were collected through self-report questionnaires, Harman's single-factor test was performed to assess the potential presence of common method bias. The results indicated that the first unrotated factor accounted for less than 50% of the total variance, suggesting that common method bias was not a substantial threat to the validity of the findings.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics software. Prior to the analyses, the dataset was screened for missing values and outliers. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages, were calculated to summarize participants' demographic characteristics and responses to the Football Team Brand Associations Scale. The internal consistency of the scale was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships among the dimensions of football team brand associations. Independent samples t-tests were performed to determine whether brand association scores differed according to gender, while one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to examine differences according to participants' football interest levels. Statistical significance was established at the .05 level ($p < .05$).

RESULTS

Table 1. *Demographic Characteristics of the Participants*

Variable	Category	f	%
Gender	Male	156	50.3
	Female	154	49.7
Faculty	Health Sciences	61	19.7
	Sport Sciences	54	17.4
	Business/Economics	53	17.1
	Science-Letters	53	17.1
	Engineering	51	16.5
	Education	38	12.3
Football İnterest Level	Low	37	11.9
	Moderate	70	22.6
	High	131	42.3
	Very high	72	23.2
Match Following Frequency	Rarely	28	9
	Sometimes	83	26.8
	Often	114	36.8
	Every match	85	27.4
Total		310	100

As presented in Table 1, the study sample consisted of 310 university students, including 156 males (50.3%) and 154 females (49.7%). Participants were recruited from six academic faculties, with the largest proportion coming from the Faculty of Health Sciences (19.7%). Regarding football interest, most participants reported high (42.3%) or very high (23.2%) levels of interest. Furthermore, 64.2% of the participants indicated that they followed football matches often or every match, suggesting a relatively high level of engagement with football-related activities.

Table 2. *Descriptive Statistics and Internal Consistency of the Football Team Brand Associations Scale*

Variable	x̄	Sd	Cronbach α
Football Team Brand Associations	3.74	0.52	.93

The mean score of the Football Team Brand Associations Scale was 3.74 (SD = 0.52), indicating that participants reported moderately positive perceptions of brand associations related to their supported football teams. The overall reliability of the scale was high (Cronbach's α = .93), demonstrating excellent internal consistency.

Table 3. *Pearson Correlations Among the Ten Dimensions of the Football Team Brand Associations Scale*

Factors	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Success	—									
2. Coach	.54**	—								
3. Star player	.58**	.59**	—							
4. Management	.55**	.65**	.61**	—						
5. Club history	.56**	.62**	.53**	.56**	—					
6. Stadium	.56**	.60**	.59**	.60**	.56**	—				
7. Brand marks	.58**	.60**	.56**	.62**	.56**	.60**	—			
8. Escape	.16**	.24**	.24**	.20**	.21**	.22**	.20**	—		
9. Fan identification	.55**	.56**	.54**	.57**	.49**	.53**	.55**	.20**	—	
10. Social interaction	.56**	.60**	.61**	.60**	.56**	.59**	.55**	.21**	.53**	—

Note. Values represent Pearson correlation coefficients. **All correlations were statistically significant at the .01 level (two-tailed).

As presented in Table 3, all dimensions of the Football Team Brand Associations Scale were positively and significantly correlated with one another (all $p < .01$). Correlation coefficients ranged from .16 to .65, indicating low to moderate associations among the constructs. The strongest relationship was found between Coach and Management ($r = .65$), while Escape demonstrated relatively weaker correlations with the other dimensions. Furthermore, none of the inter-factor correlations exceeded .85, supporting the discriminant validity of the scale and indicating that the dimensions capture related but distinct aspects of football team brand associations.

Table 4. *Differences in Brand Association Scores According to Football Interest Level*

Interest level	n	x̄	Sd	F	p
Low	37	3.64	0.47	0.53	.663
Moderate	70	3.77	0.49		
High	131	3.75	0.51		
Very High	72	3.74	0.59		

The results of the ANOVA analysis indicated that brand association scores did not differ significantly according to participants' level of interest in football. Although participants with moderate and high interest levels reported slightly higher mean scores, these differences were not statistically significant.

Table 5. *Gender Differences in Brand Association Scores*

Gender	n	Mean	Sd	t	p
Male	156	3.73	0.54	−0.35,	.725
Female	154	3.75	0.50		

Independent samples t-test results showed that brand association perceptions did not significantly differ between male and female participants. This finding suggests that gender does not play a determining role in the perception of football team brand associations within the current sample.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to examine university students' perceptions of football team brand associations related to their supported teams and to investigate whether these perceptions differed according to demographic characteristics. The findings indicated that the overall level of football team brand associations among participants was moderately high, suggesting that participants generally perceived positive associations with their supported football teams. These findings are consistent with the sport marketing literature emphasizing that emotional attachment and symbolic meanings play a critical role in shaping perceptions of sports brands.

One of the most notable findings of this study is the high internal consistency of the overall brand association scale. This result supports previous research suggesting that brand associations constitute a multidimensional but coherent structure within sport organizations (Gladden & Funk, 2002). In sport marketing contexts, brand associations are considered a fundamental component of brand equity, as they influence how fans perceive and emotionally connect with their teams. The findings of the present study therefore reinforce the argument that sports teams operate not only as athletic entities but also as powerful consumer brands.

Another important finding was the positive relationship observed among the different dimensions of football team brand associations. These relationships suggest that university students' perceptions of

team success, coach image, star players, management, club history, stadium characteristics, brand marks, fan identification, and social interaction are interconnected rather than independent. This finding is consistent with previous research indicating that sport consumers develop holistic perceptions of sports teams based on multiple functional, symbolic, and experiential attributes (Bouzdine-Chameeva et al., 2015). These attributes collectively contribute to the symbolic and experiential value of sports brands.

The positive correlations observed among the dimensions of brand associations also support the notion that sport team branding is inherently relational and multidimensional. Prior studies have similarly reported that brand-related perceptions in sports are strongly interconnected (Eskiler et al., 2021). For example, team success, management quality, and star players often reinforce one another in shaping fans' emotional attachment and commitment toward a team.

The findings of the present study also highlight the role of team identification in shaping fans' perceptions of sports brands. Social Identity Theory provides an important theoretical framework for understanding the psychological relationship between fans and their teams. According to this perspective, individuals derive part of their self-concept from the social groups with which they identify, including sports teams (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). When individuals identify strongly with a team, they are more likely to internalize the team's successes and failures as part of their own identity (Wann et al., 2014). This psychological connection helps explain why sports teams generate strong brand associations among fans.

Consistent with this theoretical perspective, previous studies have demonstrated that team identification significantly influences fan behaviors such as game attendance, merchandise purchase, and media consumption (Kwon et al., 2022). Highly identified fans tend to develop stronger emotional connections with teams and are more willing to invest time, money, and psychological resources in supporting them. Similarly, research has shown that team identification can influence consumer purchase intentions and engagement with sports-related marketing activities (Lee, 2021).

Another important aspect highlighted in sport marketing literature is the role of fan communities in reinforcing brand associations. Sports fans often form communities that share common values, emotions, and experiences related to their teams. These communities strengthen identification and enhance the symbolic meaning of the sports brand (Mills et al., 2022). As a result, brand associations are not only formed through individual experiences but also through social interactions among fans.

Interestingly, the results of the present study did not reveal significant differences in brand association perceptions across several demographic variables. This finding suggests that football team brand associations may be shaped more strongly by psychological and emotional factors than by demographic characteristics. Previous research has also indicated that psychological constructs such as fan identification and emotional attachment are stronger predictors of fan behavior than demographic variables (Toder-Alon et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the absence of significant gender differences in brand association perceptions aligns with studies indicating that sports fandom has become increasingly gender-inclusive in recent decades. While early sport marketing research often portrayed sports fandom as male-dominated, contemporary research suggests that female fans exhibit similar levels of identification and engagement with sports teams (Prayag et al., 2020).

Another noteworthy observation concerns the relationship between football interest level and brand associations. Although participants with higher interest in football reported slightly higher brand association scores, these differences were not statistically significant. This result may indicate that once individuals identify themselves as fans, their perceptions of team brands become relatively stable regardless of their level of engagement with football activities. Previous research has similarly suggested that psychological attachment to teams can remain stable even when fans vary in their frequency of consumption behaviors (Wann et al., 2014).

The present findings also support the argument that sports teams function as symbolic social institutions rather than merely competitive organizations. Sports teams often represent regional, cultural, and social identities, allowing fans to express belonging and community affiliation (Marčinko Trkulja et al., 2022). Consequently, brand associations related to sports teams often include emotional and symbolic meanings that go beyond traditional product-related attributes.

From a practical perspective, the results highlight the importance of strategic brand management in professional sports organizations. Developing strong brand associations can enhance fan loyalty, increase merchandise sales, and strengthen long-term relationships with supporters. Previous research has emphasized that successful sports organizations strategically manage brand-related elements such as team identity, star players, historical achievements, and stadium experiences to enhance brand equity (Wear & Heere 2020).

Moreover, sports organizations increasingly rely on digital platforms and social media to strengthen fan engagement and brand associations. Online fan communities allow supporters to interact with each other and with teams, thereby reinforcing emotional connections and identification with the sports brand (Boehmer, 2026).

As digital fan engagement becomes more prominent, managing brand associations across multiple communication channels becomes a critical strategic priority for sports organizations.

Overall, the findings of this study contribute to the growing body of literature on sport marketing and brand management by providing empirical evidence on football team brand associations. The results suggest that brand associations among football fans are shaped by multidimensional perceptions related to team characteristics, emotional identification, and social interaction. Understanding these associations can help sports organizations design more effective marketing strategies aimed at strengthening fan engagement and long-term brand loyalty.

This study examined university students' perceptions of football team brand associations and explored whether these perceptions differed according to selected demographic variables. The findings indicated that participants generally reported moderately positive perceptions of football team brand associations. The results also demonstrated high internal consistency of the scale, confirming the reliability of the multidimensional measurement structure.

Correlation analysis revealed positive relationships among several brand association dimensions, indicating that perceptions related to team characteristics and social fan experiences are interconnected. In particular, coach image, star players, and social interaction were positively associated with other dimensions of football team brand associations. Additionally, the results did not reveal significant differences in brand association perceptions according to gender or football interest level.

Overall, the study contributes to the sport marketing literature by providing empirical evidence on the multidimensional nature of football team brand associations and highlighting the relevance of emotional and social factors to participants' perceptions.

These findings may help sport organizations better understand fan perceptions and develop more effective sport branding strategies.

Practical Implications

Football teams should focus on strengthening emotional identification, fan communities, and social engagement activities rather than targeting demographic segments alone. The findings suggest that symbolic and psychological dimensions of fandom contribute substantially to brand associations.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the sample consisted of university students from a single public university in Türkiye, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, the study relied on self-reported survey data, which may be subject to response bias. Third, the cross-sectional design of the study does not allow causal interpretations of the observed relationships. Future studies should include more diverse samples from different regions and examine the influence of psychological variables such as fan identification, emotional attachment, and fan engagement on football team brand associations.

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