

Brand Image and Fan Loyalty in Professional Team Sport: A Refined Model and Empirical Assessment

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This study highlights the importance of brand image for fan loyalty in team sport. A parsimonious 4-factor, 20-indicator structure effectively represents brand image. In contrast to Keller's proposed model, relationships between the brand image's components were discovered. Thus, in line with means-end theory, a brand-image model should incorporate causalities among brand attributes, benefits, and attitudes. Fan loyalty is positively influenced by a fan's brand attitude. Relationships among the brand-image dimensions and loyalty are confirmed via structural equation modeling. The non-product-related brand attributes (i.e., logo or tradition) have a particularly large impact on attitudes and behavior. They represent promising starting points for a successful and differentiating team brand strategy.

In marketing practice, an increasing interest in customer relationships has become apparent, turning customer retention into a top priority for many firms (Homburg & Giering, 1999). Recent developments in the sport industry, such as the growing commercialization and professionalization of team-sport clubs and leagues, have resulted in the growing importance of a stable fan base as an imperative driver of a team's competitive advantage. The pivotal role of brand loyalty has been summarized as follows: "First, brand loyalty ensures a more stable following even when the core product's performance falters (i.e., the team has a losing season). . . . Second, brand loyalty creates opportunities for product extensions beyond the core product" (Gladden & Funk, 2001, p. 68).

In Germany's professional team sport, however, customer- or fan-retention activities still lack broad acceptance (Mussler, 1999). This can be traced back to the fact that, traditionally, German sports clubs are nonprofit organizations (i.e., registered associations). Major-league clubs have only recently founded commercial marketing companies or changed their legal form into limited-liability corporations. As a consequence, commercial goals, such as a stable sports performance or media and commercial returns, have clearly gained in importance. Nevertheless, the development of effective marketing strategies and instruments to retain and expand the fan base is still in its infancy.

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One promising strategy for sport marketers to drive sport consumers' preferences and loyalty is to build strong, positive, and unique consumer beliefs about the club—in other words, to construct a strong brand image. Given its highly competitive nature, branding can play an important role by influencing fan preferences and perceptions regarding the club and by differentiating it from competing clubs and other leisure activities. Therefore, it is essential to understand how strong brands are established in sports. Moreover, Ross (2006) recommends research that theoretically and empirically investigates the relationship between a strong brand and such consequences as team loyalty and merchandise sales.

This article develops a parsimonious model to measure brand image in the team-sport industry while at the same time demonstrates the importance of brand image for fan loyalty. In so doing, we examine the link between brand image and fan loyalty. The concept and operationalization of brand loyalty in team sport (fan loyalty) is first presented. We focus on fans rather than casual spectators because fans represent the most important customer segment for team-sport clubs. Second, brand image in team sport is described, and a measurement model is suggested. Third, relationships among the constructs are examined from a theoretical point of view and verified through an empirical study of fans of German soccer clubs. Finally, the results of this study and their implications for sport marketers are discussed.

There are many reasons for choosing soccer as the context for our study. The key reason is that European soccer clubs enjoy an extensive global popularity and generate high incomes and revenues. Today, European clubs and federations produce more than US\$12.5 billion of income, and European soccer's leading clubs even earn larger revenues than American sports franchises. Manchester United, for example, generated more than US\$300 million in revenues in 2002 and 2003. The biggest earner in the German Bundesliga is Bayern Munich, with revenues totaling approximately US\$200 million (Deloitte, 2004). In addition, with few exceptions (e.g., Bauer, Sauer, & Schmitt, 2004), team-sports brands have not been analyzed by scholars outside the United States. Nevertheless, soccer is only chosen as an exemplar; our model and theoretical considerations are applicable to other team sports. The study's importance lies in the fact that it enhances our understanding of fan behavior, showing that a parsimonious model of brand image in a team-sport setting can cover the aspects relevant to sport teams. The model can readily be applied by managers of sport teams to measure their team's brand image.

Loyalty as a Fundamental Success Measure

The Concept of Fan Loyalty

In the sports context, generally speaking, a fan can be defined as someone who perceives him- or herself as a fan of a certain team or a sport in general (Dietz-Uhler, Harrick, End, & Jaquemotte, 2000). Apart from behavioral characteristics, fans can be differentiated by their degree of attachment to a team, which is their attitudinal loyalty to the team. Although attitudinal loyalty is a particularly important concept in the sports context, it has only recently been examined. For a rather long time, sport management and psychology research have focused on behavioral indicators of fan loyalty such as spectator attendance figures (e.g., DeSchrive & Jensen, 2002; Funk, Mahony, & Ridinger, 2002; Hansen & Gauthier, 1989). The

attitudinal dimension of fan loyalty comprises the inner relatedness of fans to their team and distinguishes between spurious loyalty and “true” loyalty. Spurious loyalty characterizes a sport spectator who does not possess a strong positive attitude but who nevertheless watches games on an ongoing basis (Backman & Crompton, 1991). Although repeat attendance is the most obvious manifestation of a person’s behavioral attachment to a team, the exclusive use of such a behavioral indicator ignores important underlying psychological processes such as a deep inner solidarity with the team (Mahony, Madrigal, & Howard, 2000). A measure of game attendance, for instance, does not provide insights into the behavioral pattern of fans watching the team’s games on a regular basis. For example, games might be watched regularly because the person was given a season ticket. In another case, games might be watched as a result of the strong personal attachment the person has for the team. Consequently, researchers have recently developed both pure attitudinal and composite (i.e., attitude + behavior) measures of fan loyalty (e.g., Gladden & Funk, 2001; Hill & Green, 2000; Mahony, Madrigal, & Howard, 2000; Pritchard, Havitz, & Howard, 1999). As Jacoby and Chestnut (1978) note, neither behavioral nor psychological relatedness alone can sufficiently explain consumer loyalty. Thus, to capture the full content of the loyalty concept, it is necessary to include both behavior and attitude criteria when examining fan loyalty.

The Attitudinal Dimension of Fan Loyalty

The attitudinal dimension of fan loyalty is represented by the psychological commitment of a fan to a team. Commitment is typically defined as the emotional or psychological attachment to a brand (Beatty & Kahle, 1988). Previous measures of fans’ psychological commitment have included three components of commitment: inner attachment, persistence, and resistance (e.g., Gladden & Funk, 2001; Mahony, Madrigal, & Howard, 2000; Pritchard, Havitz, & Howard, 1999). Fans therefore show a high level of psychological commitment if they feel a deep inner attachment to their favorite team and if their commitment is persistent over time and resistant to criticism.

It is useful to note that the organizational-behavior literature has examined commitment extensively (e.g., Meyer & Allen, 1984). That literature suggests that measures of commitment should also include indicators regarding the degree to which individuals care about the long-term success of the organization (O’Reilly & Chatman, 1986)—in this case their favorite club or team. We therefore integrate the concern of fans for the future welfare of their team into our attitudinal loyalty framework.

The Behavioral Dimension of Fan Loyalty

According to Homburg and Giering (1999), behavioral loyalty represents past behavior, as well as behavioral intentions. Past behavior comprises past purchasing behavior and past positive word-of-mouth. By transferring the loyalty concept to fan behavior, the following activities constitute past loyal behavior in the team sport context: attending the favorite club’s games live in the stadium, watching the favorite club’s games on television, consuming other club-related media, purchasing club merchandise, wearing the colors or logo of the favorite club, and trying to convince

others that the favorite club should be supported (Fink, Trail, & Anderson, 2003; Funk & Pastore, 2000; Gladden & Funk, 2001; Mahony, Madrigal, & Howard, 2000; Shank & Beasley, 1998).

The intentional component represents the positive and persistent future behavior of the fan. It embraces intended loyal behavior and positive word-of-mouth, as well as cross-buying intentions (Homburg & Giering, 1999). The behavioral intentions correspond with the activities noted above such as intended stadium visits, intended merchandise purchases, and so forth. Positive word-of-mouth is referred to as all informal communication between a consumer and others concerning evaluations of goods or services, particularly including recommendations to others (Anderson, 1998). Cross-buying refers to a fan's practice of buying additional products and services from a favorite club brand in addition to the ones he or she currently purchases or owns (Ngobo, 2004). Cross-buying intentions seem to be particularly relevant for sport marketers today because most professional clubs now have brand extension strategies whereby they are expanding the range of branded products and services beyond club merchandise (Apostolopoulou, 2002; Chadwick & Clowes, 1998). For example, FC Bayern Munich signed a licensing agreement with HypoVereinsbank and now offers "FC Bayern Banking."

Brand Image as an Antecedent of Fan Loyalty in Professional Team Sport

Brand Image as a Central Component of Brand Equity

Especially in North America and the UK, brand management has become an accepted issue for professional team-sport clubs and leagues. Sport marketers and researchers believe that a strong brand helps sport organizations to insulate themselves from potentially detrimental financial effects of losses (Gladden & Funk, 2001; Rifkin, 1999). It is assumed that a superior brand can distinguish the team-sport product from other team-sport clubs, as well as from alternative recreational offers (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2007). Continental European sport clubs are also starting to view brand management as an essential management task, as is evident in increasing brand extensions and marketing activities tailored to additional (e.g., Asian) markets. Empirical support for the assumed positive economic consequences of strong brands in team sport is rare so far, however. Some support comes from Gladden and Funk's (2001) study that shows that brand image strongly influences the attitudinal loyalty of a club's fans. Other research also suggests that brand strength is positively related to economic success (e.g., Bauer, Sauer, & Schmitt, 2004; Robinson & Miller, 2003).

The concept of brand equity is often used to analyze the ways that brands create value. Brand equity is the effects or outcomes that accrue from marketing a product with its brand name as compared with effects or outcomes that would accrue from marketing the same product in an unbranded condition (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). To measure the brand equity of a team brand in the sport industry, the consumer-based analysis of brand equity turns out to be critical. The most prevalent models to measure brand equity from the consumer's perspective are proposed by Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993). Aaker (1991) regards brand equity

as a synopsis of advantages and disadvantages that a customer relates to a brand or symbol and that drive the value of a product or service. Keller draws on Aaker's conceptual framework and suggests a customer-based brand equity model that treats customer knowledge as the central driver of brand equity. Today, Keller's (1993) model is one of the most widely used conceptual frameworks to measure brand equity. In this conceptualization, brand equity consists of two components: brand awareness and brand image. Brand awareness relates to a consumer's ability to recognize and recall a brand. Brand awareness is the vital first step in building brand associations that are attached to the brand node in memory. Unless brand awareness has occurred, brand associations cannot be formed, and intentions to buy cannot occur. Keller further suggests measuring brand associations through a three-dimensional framework including the favorability, strength, and uniqueness of brand associations in the consumer's memory.

There are a number of reasons for applying Keller's (1993) customer-based brand equity concept to measure the brand equity of a team-sport brand. First, the model provides far more detail than other models regarding the necessary considerations when measuring brand equity. Second, compared with other models, it fosters more useful insight into the dimensions of consumers' knowledge structures that determine brand equity—dimensions that club managers can at least partly control. Third, some of Keller's key ideas have been successfully adapted to the team-sport context (e.g., Gladden & Funk, 2001, 2002).

For those reasons, we base our empirical model on Keller's (1993) work. We focus on brand image, rather than brand awareness, because brand awareness is usually high for professional clubs in popular sports like soccer. Put differently, in the case of major-league clubs, it can be assumed that brand recognition and recall are already high for people interested in the particular sport. Furthermore, because media exposure is strongly influenced by the team's competitive success, the opportunities to manage brand awareness actively are mitigated. Thus, brand management for popular professional sport teams should focus on building favorable and distinct brand beliefs among actual and potential fans. Given the unpredictability and instability of the team-sport product, which we define as the performance and outcomes at games, brand image has the potential to represent one of the few constants in fans' perceptions. Brand image, therefore, offers sport marketers a unique opportunity to present a consistent and stable club appearance to their fans and the public. Consequently, we only measure brand image in this article. It might be the case, however, that brand awareness needs to be measured in contexts where most fans are casual fans or where the club or sport is not well known.

Conceptualization of the Image of a Team Brand

Brand image is the cumulative product of brand associations in the consumer's mind. With regard to content, there are three different types of brand associations: attributes, benefits, and attitudes. Customer-based brand equity develops when a consumer holds favorable, strong, and unique brand associations in memory.

Product- and Non-Product-Related Attributes. Attributes relate to the intrinsic properties of the brand that characterize a product or service. *Product-related attributes* refer to a product's physical composition or a service's fundamental

requirement. External aspects of the product or service related to its purchase and consumption are defined as *non-product-related attributes* (Keller, 1993).

Two studies that conceptualized and operationalized brand image in the team-sport industry are important here. Ross, James, and Vargas (2006) introduced a brand association model, which they dubbed the Team Brand Association Scale (TBAS). They used both qualitative and quantitative work to identify eight dimensions of relevant associations, which they measure using 41 items. From a theoretical standpoint, however, one of the drawbacks of the TBAS is that it does not differentiate product-related and non-product-related attributes, brand benefits, and brand attitudes; nor does the scale obtain ratings of the favorability or uniqueness of the items or the dimensions. From practical and theoretical standpoints, this could be a problem because we do not learn if the association is positive or negative. For example, if participants only rate the strength of their association with the “head coach” (an item from the nonplayer personnel dimension of the TBAS), we do not learn if the association is favorable or unfavorable, which is important to know. Furthermore, the TBAS treats commitment as an indicator of brand image, although it is more appropriately treated as a part of brand loyalty.

The second model to conceptualize brand equity is Gladden and Funk’s (2001, 2002) team association model (TAM). That model specifies 13 dimensions of brand associations that constitute sport teams’ brand equity. The model is particularly complex, which compromises its utility as a research tool. Furthermore, although the TAM is intended to operationalize Keller’s (1993) model for team sports, it does not measure the uniqueness, favorability, or strength of brand associations, which Keller’s model requires. Rather, consistent with the customer-based brand equity model, the items are classified into attributes, benefits, and attitudes. Consequently, in the work that follows, we refine and modify Gladden and Funk’s (2001, 2002) model in an effort to overcome the aforementioned limitations. Modifications and additions to the model are based on theoretical and empirical considerations, including the results of a pretest, which was carried out in the form of free-association tasks with six soccer fans.

With respect to *product-related attributes*, Gladden and Funk (2001, 2002) propose four dimensions: success, star player, head coach, and management. We treat product-related attributes as characteristics of or contributors to actual team performance. They therefore represent the core product. More precisely, all the people and outcomes that are directly related to the actual games are labeled as product-related attributes. We further modify Gladden and Funk’s classification scheme by defining success, star player, head coach, team (members), and team performance (team play) as product-related attributes. We exclude “management” from product-related attributes because, from the consumer’s perspective, management does not contribute to the team performance in the way that coaches, stars, and other players do. We add the attributes “team members” and “team performance/team play” to the brand-image framework because the team itself is an important success factor and because a team can be unsuccessful despite good performances. Table 1 provides a summary of the brand image components employed in this study and compares them to the TAM.

Non-product-related attributes do not directly affect performance. They are external aspects of the core product that are relevant to its consumption and, consequently, influence perceptions of the club brand. These are management, logo

Table 1 Conceptualization of Study Constructs in Comparison With Existing Scales

Factor/Item	Brand Image Concept	
	By Gladden and Funk (2001)	In This Manuscript
Product-related brand attributes	Success (3 items)	Success ^a
	Star player (3 items)	Star player(s) ^a
	Head coach (3 items)	Head coach ^a
	Management (3 items)	—
	—	Team ^a
	—	Team performance ^a
Non-product-related brand attributes	—	Management ^a
	Logo design (3 items)	Logo and club colors ^a
	Stadium (3 items)	Stadium ^a
	Product delivery (3 items)	—
	Tradition (3 items)	Club history and tradition ^a
	—	Club culture and values ^a
	—	Fans ^a
	—	Sponsor or owner ^a
	—	Regional provenance ^a
Brand benefits (sb = symbolic benefits; eb = experiential benefits)	Pride in place (3 items)	Pride in place ^b [sb]
	Fan identification (4 items)	Fan identification ^b [sb]
	Peer-group acceptance (3 items)	Peer-group acceptance ^b [sb]
	Nostalgia (3 items)	Nostalgia ^b [eb]
	Escape (3 items)	Escape ^b [eb]
	—	Socializing/companionship ^b [eb]
	—	Emotions ^b [eb]
Brand attitudes	—	Entertainment ^b [eb]
	Importance (3 items)	—
	Knowledge (3 items)	—
	Affect (4 items)	Affect (4 items)

^aEach of these items was measured by its strength, favorability, and uniqueness; ^bEach of these items was measured by its strength and uniqueness.

and club colors, stadium, club history and tradition, club culture and values, fans, sponsor or owner, and regional provenance. The last four components of the non-product-related attributes are not included in the TAM (see Table 1).

Our model derives from four considerations. First, because there is no physical core product that can transport the underlying values, the perception of service brands is strongly influenced by the organizational culture and the behavior of the organization's members (De Chernatony & Segal-Horn, 2001). Successful team-sport brands such as Manchester United, for example, have clear values that consumers and employees understand and live. In Germany, major-league soccer clubs have distinct club cultures. Bayern Munich, for instance, represents an elitist "celebrity club" that can be clearly distinguished from "working class clubs," such as FC Schalke 04. Second, the fans of a club can clearly influence the club's brand

image because they play a crucial role in creating the team-sport product. "In other words, football needs supporters not just as customers but because they form part of a unique joint product" (Morrow, 1999, p. 13). Third, the image of the sponsor or owner (e.g., in the case of Bayer 04 Leverkusen or the Volkswagen-owned Wolfsburg) can also have spillover effects on the club's brand image. Recently, companies have attempted to attract attention by sponsoring stadiums such as the Allianz Arena in Munich or the AOL Arena in Hamburg. Fourth, the association of regional provenance corresponds to country-of-origin effects on a local, regional, or national level. For example, the images of the London-based clubs Arsenal and Chelsea are influenced by their respective neighborhoods.

Benefits. Marketing research has shown that consumers do not buy product features and attributes but rather bundles of benefits (e.g., Lancaster, 1966). Benefits are the personal value and meaning that consumers attach to the brand's attributes, which satisfy underlying needs and motivations (Keller, 1993). The brand's benefits depend on the individual consumer's needs and personal values as represented by attributes of the product or service (Keller, 1993). Three types of benefits are suggested by the literature: functional, symbolic, and experiential benefits (e.g., Park, Jaworski, & MacInnis 1986). Functional benefits are benefits motivating the search for products that solve consumption-related problems. They correspond to a brand's capacity for functional, utilitarian, or physical performance. Symbolic benefits derive from products that fulfill internally generated needs for self-enhancement, role position, group membership, or ego identification. Experiential benefits are obtained from products that provide sensory and emotional pleasure, variety, or cognitive stimulation. Spectators at sport events typically seek to meet their experiential and symbolic needs rather than their functional needs, because sport spectatorship is not related to solving consumption-related problems. For this reason, functional benefits are not included in our model.

We identified the following symbolic benefits: pride in place, fan identification, and peer-group acceptance. In addition, the following experiential benefits appear to be relevant in the team-sport setting: nostalgia (evoked fond memories), escape (get away from it all), socializing and companionship, emotions, and entertainment. Therefore, on the basis of the pretest and theoretical considerations, we added socializing and companionship, emotions, and entertainment to the TAM (see Table 1). Socializing and companionship refers to developing and maintaining relations with other fans. Many fans particularly enjoy watching games in company with people who share their interest in the respective activity (McDonald, Milne, & Hong, 2002). Second, sport elicits strong emotions. Sport fans regularly experience joy, pride, or ecstasy, as well as anger, frustration, worry, or shame. Moreover, fans act out these emotions with less restraint than would be imposed in other social settings. Third, the entertainment factor is an important benefit for spectators in the stadium and supporters viewing games on television (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2007). These benefits also serve as motivation for spectator and fan behavior. Because the literature recognizes an even larger number of motives (e.g., Trail & James, 2001), one could ask why motives such as the acquisition of knowledge or drama or eustress have not been included in our framework. The reason is that the benefits included here are those that individuals primarily associate with a team brand, whereas others (e.g., acquisition of knowledge) are not

necessarily top-of-mind associations (which our pretests confirmed). To develop a parsimonious model, we focused on the most important associations.

Brand Attitudes. Brand attitudes are the final type of brand associations. Attitudes are “a learned predisposition to respond in a consistently favorable or unfavorable manner with respect to a given object” (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975, p. 6). Hence, brand attitudes represent summary judgments and the consumer’s overall evaluation of a brand, which typically depend on the beliefs about the attributes and benefits. Researchers often examine attitudes in terms of three dimensions: affective, cognitive, and behavioral (e.g., Rosenberg & Hovland, 1960). In contrast, attitudes can also be defined as solely affective constructs that reflect predispositions toward an object, which might lead to overt behavior (Lutz, 1991). We follow this unidimensional approach for two reasons: (1) The fan’s behavior is modeled in our behavioral loyalty concept; and (2) the belief system that underlies fans’ brand attitudes is related to nonfunctional benefits, so the attitudes are predominantly affective. Because brand attitudes are overall evaluations of a brand, they are abstract and are above the other more specific types of brand associations.

Model Structure

The positive relationship between brand image and brand loyalty is frequently mentioned in the brand literature, although there have been few empirical studies regarding that relationship. In particular, the relationships between the different dimensions of brand image or equity and loyalty have, with a few exceptions (e.g., Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001), rarely been examined. Keller (1993) points out that the different categories of brand associations are not independent from each other. In line with this view, we examine the links among the different types of brand associations that constitute brand image.

The linkages among the different types of brand associations can be explained on the basis of means-end theory (Gutman, 1982). In the means-end approach, brand or product knowledge is hierarchically organized into three key categories: attributes, consequences, and values. The underlying idea is that product attributes are the means for consumers to obtain desired ends (i.e., value) through the consequences of those attributes. Attributes (means) are on the lowest hierarchical level of the means-end chain. They are ideally linked to desirable consequences (benefits) for the consumer (Gutman, 1982).

This study examined the linkages among the different types of brand associations on an aggregate level. Thus, we do not analyze the links among the single specific associations, such as the relationship between star player and entertainment. We averaged the strength, favorability, and uniqueness of the brand attributes to develop the variables. We expect both product-related and non-product-related attributes to affect symbolic and experiential benefits. On these bases, the following hypotheses were formulated.

H₁: The stronger, more favorable, and more unique a fan’s brand associations are with product-related attributes, the greater the perceived benefits.

H₂: The stronger, more favorable, and more unique a fan’s brand associations are with non-product-related attributes, the greater the perceived benefits.

The degree to which a brand fulfills the individual's values and delivers benefits is expressed in the brand attitude. Especially for brands providing nonfunctional benefits, attitudes serve as a value expressive function by allowing consumers to express their self-concept (Lutz, 1991). Therefore, there should be a positive link between the fan's experienced emotional and symbolic benefits and his or her attitude, which leads to the following hypothesis.

H₃: The greater a fan's perceived benefits, the more positive his or her attitude.

The hypothesized causal chain is complemented by psychological commitment (i.e., attitudinal loyalty). The relationship between attitudes and commitment represents the interface between the higher level concepts of brand image and fan loyalty. Therefore, we expect the following relationship.

H₄: The more positive a fan's attitude, the higher his or her psychological commitment.

Furthermore, we expect that attitudinal loyalty is an antecedent of behavioral loyalty. Iwasaki and Havitz (1998, p. 256), for example, suggest that "individuals go through sequential psychological processes to become loyal participants including . . . the development of psychological commitment to a brand." Moreover, the connection between these constructs can be justified by the attitude-behavior relationship, demonstrated in a multitude of studies (e.g., Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Kuo, Chang, and Cheng (2004), conclude that loyalty studies should be multidimensional. Consequently, we predict that loyal behavior is based on loyal attitudes.

H₅: The higher the psychological commitment of a fan, the higher his or her behavioral loyalty.

Method

Participants

Data were collected from fans of German soccer teams using an online survey. A total of 1,298 usable questionnaires were collected. As was expected, the sample was dominated by male respondents, comprising 85% of the total sample. This was expected because soccer is a sport predominantly favored by males. The average age of the respondents was 26.6 years. Thirty-two percent of the respondents were employed by a third party, 31% were students, 12% were in vocational training, and 6% were self-employed. Forty-two percent of the respondents have a 13-year degree, 19% have a 10-year high-school degree, 17% are graduates with a master's degree, and 13% own a degree in a practical training. Thus, the sample is somewhat above average in educational attainment. The sample is also unrepresentative of the target population in terms of gender and age because estimates by Sportfive (2002) show that 27.2% of stadium visitors are female and 15.7% are over 50 years of age. Overall, however, the sample has reasonable representation of people from relevant age, professional, and social-class groups. Given that the respondents were recruited via online discussion forums, then asked to name their favorite team and to respond to the items concerning that team, our sample is biased toward more

committed fans. Because that segment is the most relevant target group for sport marketers, we consider this to be advantageous.

Measures

We adapted items from existing scales and developed additional items based on our review of the literature. All items were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*totally agree*). The exact item wordings are given in the Appendix.

Fan Loyalty. The fan loyalty construct consists of two dimensions: psychological commitment and behavioral loyalty. Attitudinal loyalty was measured by items adapted from the Psychological Commitment to a Team (PCT) scale (Mahony, Madrigal, & Howard, 2000; Kwon & Trail, 2003) and from the TAM (Gladden & Funk, 2001). In addition, we added two items embracing the notion that committed fans deeply care about the future welfare of the club. These items were drawn from Garbarino and Johnson's (1999) commitment scale. These scales have not previously been tested on German soccer fans. For that reason, we included a wide range of possible items that describe the construct.

We used both general measures of brand loyalty (Homburg & Giering, 1999) and sport-specific measures (e.g., Fink, Trail, & Anderson, 2003) to formulate the behavioral items. The behavioral-loyalty construct considers both past (e.g., "I have purchased a lot of club-related merchandise") and future behaviors (e.g., "I will purchase a lot of club-related merchandise"). To reduce the complexity for the construct and structural-equation analyses, we aggregated the item scores for the past and future behavior items by calculating an average score.

Brand Image. We built on the TAM (Gladden & Funk, 2001, 2002) to develop a convenient brand-image measure. We therefore had 13 dimensions of brand associations that constitute brand equity in the team-sport setting, with each dimension measured by three or four items. The measure consisted of 40 items.

To measure the fans' perceptions concerning brand attributes, we formulated our measures in keeping with Keller's (1993) suggestions. Consequently, we used three indicators to measure the favorability, strength, and uniqueness of each brand attribute. (This measurement departs from Gladden and Funk [2001, 2002], who did not consider favorability, strength, and uniqueness.) Regarding the associated benefits, respondents were merely asked for the strength and uniqueness because benefits are favorable by definition. For the exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses, the mean value of these two or three items for each benefit or attribute is used, that is, items were aggregated for the analyses. The operationalization of the constructs is shown in the Appendix. When appropriate, items were aggregated for analysis. Respondents were merely asked for the strength and uniqueness of the associated benefits because benefits are favorable by definition. When brand attributes were measured, the average score of both items was used in analyses.

To operationalize brand attitude, respondents were asked to rate four affective statements using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*totally agree*). Brand attitudes are overall evaluations of a brand, and thus are closely related to psychological commitment. Because both concepts represent attitudes,

the distinction between brand attitudes and psychological commitment might not be clear, so there are potential challenges for measurement discrimination.

Procedure

To test the hypothesized brand-image model and its relationships with commitment and behavioral loyalty, the 18 professional soccer teams of the major German league Bundesliga were used as study objects. From an economic point of view, the clubs qualify as medium-scale enterprises today. Three of the clubs (Bayern Munich, Borussia Dortmund, and Schalke 04) are among Europe's top 20 clubs in revenue. League matches have the highest attendance of European top division leagues, exceeding 35,000 on average. All respondents are fans of one of the 18 German Bundesliga teams.

The questionnaire was distributed by posting brief notes in the online discussion forums of each club. As an incentive, respondents could win subscriptions to a German soccer magazine or vouchers for the online store, www.amazon.de. To ensure high-quality responses, each returned questionnaire was screened for formal and content consistency. Formal consistency required that the entire questionnaire was completed and that the time to complete it was not less than 5 minutes. (On average, it took respondents retained in our sample slightly more than 10 minutes to complete the survey.) Content consistency required that there was some variation in responses (i.e., all items were not rated using precisely the same value). Questionnaires that failed to meet formal or content consistency requirements were dropped from further study.

Analysis

Complex constructs, like brand image in the team-sport industry, are typically evaluated using a number of reliability and validity criteria. These include classic techniques, such as exploratory factor analysis (EFA), item-to-total correlation (ITTC), and Cronbach's alpha (α), as well as more contemporary techniques such as confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), and structural equation modeling (SEM). Each of these techniques was employed in this study. Because our data are non-normally distributed, we applied the Satorra–Bentler adjustment for nonnormality (Satorra & Bentler, 1994).

Results

Measurement Models of Study Constructs

The analysis (EFA, ITTC, α , and CFA) of the two fan-loyalty constructs showed that some indicators did not meet the required goodness-of-fit criteria. In the case of psychological commitment, both items relating to the “concern for the future welfare of the club” had to be eliminated. The indicator “watching of the games on TV” did not meet the required fit criteria. The omitted items are marked with parentheses in Table A1 of the Appendix. After eliminating these indicators, the measurement models are satisfactory.

Reasonable explanations can be given for elimination of these indicators. Concern for the team's future welfare was rated highly by all fans, so it did not discriminate between less and more loyal fans. Elimination of the item referencing game consumption through media is a consequence of the fact that watching games on television is a substitute for attendance at the stadium. The fan does one or the other at any one time, but not both. So the correlation between the items is low, even though they logically represent the same underlying construct.

Analyses of the brand-image constructs resulted in the elimination of several items. Because of their failure to meet the ITTC or CFA fit criteria, we dropped the following indicators of non-product-related attributes: management, club culture and values, sponsor or owner, and regional provenance. These associations do not unequivocally contribute to the team's brand image. With regard to regional provenance, it is plausible that the hometown of a team is valued more favorably by local fans. Accordingly, nonlocal fans do not necessarily appreciate the team's regional provenance for its own sake. Regarding sponsorship, research has revealed that spectators do not necessarily associate the sponsor with the respective club. Moreover, sponsors change regularly.

One benefit indicator, "pride in place," also failed to meet the goodness-of-fit criteria. This was theoretically acceptable because not every fan is a local fan—especially for very popular clubs such as Bayern Munich or FC Schalke 04. All indicators of brand attitudes showed satisfactory fit, however.

As Table 2 shows, the final measurement models of the corporate brand-image construct now meet all required goodness-of-fit criteria. Factor loadings of the EFA and CFA provide a ranking of item importance. The team and its performance represent the key indicators of product-related attributes. These items are therefore pivotal when trying to increase a fan's (positive) associations with the core product. The "fans" dimension is the most crucial when trying to strengthen a fan's association with non-product-related attributes. This result confirms the relevance of a stable and committed following for a team's brand image because it also represents a very important association with the team brand from the perspective of other supporters. The indicators that are most central for the management of benefits associated with a team are identification, escape, and emotions.

Structural Equation Model

Before testing the proposed relationships, we examined the discriminant validity of the constructs by comparing the squared correlation between two constructs with their respective average variance extracted. Discriminant validity is obtained if the average variance extracted (AVE) of both constructs is greater than their squared correlation (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Because the squared correlation between brand attitude and psychological commitment (.78) exceeded AVE for both constructs, we were compelled to eliminate one construct. In addition, because our objective is to develop a complete brand-image model, we chose to exclude psychological commitment from our path analysis. Consequently, hypothesis H_4 had to be adapted, and H_5 could not be tested. We instead base our hypothesis on the generally acknowledged attitude–behavior relationship.

Table 2 Reliability of the Study Constructs

Factor/Item	EFA				CFA			
	ITTC ($\geq .40$)	Cronbach's alpha ($\geq .70$)	FL ($\geq .50$)	AVE ($\geq .50$)	CR ($\geq .60$)	FL ($\geq .60$)	t Value FL (≥ 1.645)	AVE ($\geq .50$)
Brand Image								
Product-related attributes		.85		.63	.86			.56
team	.74		.82			.83	30.10	
head coach	.54		.68			.63	22.06	
success	.79		.83			.89	31.11	
star player	.57		.77			.62	24.39	
team performance	.70		.87			.74	40.31	
Non-product-related attributes		.81		.64	.81			.53
logo and club colors	.63		.78			.69	25.17	
club history and tradition	.63		.79			.69	24.90	
stadium	.58		.79			.65	24.77	
fans	.69		.85			.85	37.04	
Brand benefits		.93		.70	.93			.65
identification	.80		.85			.86	—	
peer-group acceptance	.74		.82			.75	33.84	
escape from it all	.81		.87			.83	39.40	
socializing	.78		.85			.78	30.92	
emotions	.81		.86			.87	43.08	
nostalgia	.76		.82			.81	33.18	
entertainment	.72		.79			.75	29.96	

Brand attitude								
unique	.54	.83	.67	.88	.86	—	.65	
trustworthy	.64		.74		.75	19.35		
positive	.79		.86		.83	20.39		
likeable	.71		.82		.78	17.96		
Brand Loyalty								
Behavioral loyalty		.83		.84			.58	
stadium visits	.60		.77		.65	—		
follow reports in media	.50		.58		.54	16.42		
purchase club-related merchandise	.81		.89		.85	27.09		
wear club colors	.74		.94		.93	24.61		

Note. AVE = average variance explained/extracted; CFA = confirmatory factor analysis; CFI = comparative fit index; CR = construct reliability; *df* = degrees of freedom; EFA = exploratory factor analysis; ITTC = item-to-total-correlation; NFI = normed fit index; RMSEA = root-mean-square error of approximation; SRMR = standardized root mean square residual; TLI = Tucker Lewis index; Global fit: NFI = .946; TLI = .944; CFI = .950; SRMR = .097; RMSEA = .096; $SB-\chi^2/df = 3,213.52/247$

H_{4B} : The more positive a fan's attitude, the higher his or her behavioral loyalty.

As Table 3 shows, discriminant validity among the remaining study constructs was thus obtained.

To test the relationships specified in hypotheses H_1 to H_{4B} , we used the structural equation model (i.e., LISREL) with the Satorra–Bentler adjustment (by using the asymptotic covariance matrix). As Table 4 shows, with the exception of the RMSEA and χ^2 -values, global fit criteria are satisfactory. In addition, all relationships are highly significant. The model is retained. Its parameters indicate that all hypotheses can be accepted.

Discussion

This study demonstrates the significant role that a club's brand image (i.e., fans' perceptions of a club's attributes and benefits) plays in fostering loyal fan behavior. Most important, a club's brand image consists of product- and non-product-related brand attributes, as well as brand benefits and brand attitudes. The explicit

Table 3 Discriminant Validity (Fornell/Larcker Criterion)

		Product-related attributes	Non-product-related attributes	Brand benefits	Brand attitude	Behavioral loyalty
	AVE	.56	.53	.65	.65	.58
Product-related attributes	.56	1				
Non-product-related attributes	.53	.00	1			
Brand benefits	.65	.09	.53	1		
Brand attitude	.65	.17	.34	.58	1	
Behavioral loyalty	.58	.02	.34	.55	.30	1

Table 4 SEM Fit Indicators

Causal Relationships	γ/β	<i>t</i> value	SMC	Global Fit Criteria		
Product-related attributes → benefits	.26	11.24		SB- χ^2	<i>df</i>	RMSEA
			.605			
Non-product-related attributes → benefits	.71	23.13		3,213.52	247	.096
Benefits → brand attitudes	.83	19.66	.692	SRMR	NFI	TLI
Brand attitudes → behavioral loyalty	.64	17.19	.409	.096	.946	.944

Note. γ/β = path coefficients; SMC = squared multiple correlation (comparable to R^2 in regression analysis); RMSEA = root-mean-square error of approximation; SRMR = standardized root-mean-square residual; NFI = normed fit index; TLI = Tucker Lewis index.

classification of items within these categories advances the modeling of brand associations. Product-related brand attributes constitute the core product of a team brand and consist of the team, head coach, star player, success, and team play. The non-product-related brand attributes are defined by club history and tradition, logo and club colors, fans, and stadium. The perceived benefits are multifaceted and include identification with the team, peer-group acceptance, escape, socializing and companionship, emotions, nostalgia, and entertainment.

The effect of the non-product-related attributes on benefits is almost triple that of product-related benefits. This might come as a surprise because one could logically expect product-related attributes (e.g., the team, star player, head coach, play, success) to be of greater importance to fans. This result is consistent, however, with previous research on brand associations in team sport (Bauer, Sauer, & Schmitt, 2004). Because most of the fans have a long fan history, they have all experienced ups and downs of their team such as player and coach changes, for example. Perhaps for that reason contextual factors (i.e., the stadium atmosphere, other fans, club history and tradition) have greater relevance to them. This result suggests neither competitive success nor the team itself is a central driver of fans' utility perception. Nevertheless, product and nonproduct attributes together account for only 60.5% of variance in perceived benefits. Although this is a good prediction, it also shows that other (not yet measured) factors also provide value to fans.

The fact that the benefits fans obtain through the team brand are strongly affected by the brand's product- and non-product-related attributes is consistent with research deriving from means-end theory. It shows, however, that Keller's (1993) brand associations model should be extended to causalities among the constructs. For instance, there should be not only an assumed link between attributes and benefits, but also a positive effect emanating from attributes to benefits.

The relationship between beliefs and brand attitude is also significant. Benefits explain 69.2% of the variance in brand attitudes. Because "benefits" is a construct with broad content, this result is reasonable. The entertainment aspect accounts for the smallest amount of variance explained, whereas identification and emotion deliver the highest amount. In contradiction to Gladden and Funk's (2002) results, peer-group acceptance also represents a central driver of benefit perception. Furthermore, brand attitude has a large and significant influence on behavioral loyalty, predicting 40.9% of the variance.

It is difficult to discriminate between brand attitudes and psychological commitment, the attitudinal component of fan loyalty. This study focused on behavioral loyalty, which becomes apparent in the fan's stadium visits, the consumption of club-related media, the wearing of club colors, and the purchase of club merchandise. Further research is needed, particularly longitudinal research, to explore the dynamics of loyalty.

From a practical standpoint, the findings of this study allow us to derive a number of implications for successful brand-based fan retention management. There should be a strong focus on building a strong brand identity using non-product-related attributes. Their major relevance can be explained by their relative consistency over time. Although the core product is subject to variations in composition and quality, the brand context factors allow for stability and continuity. Thus, club management aiming to increase the loyalty of their fan base should foster contact with other fans and cultivate the team's tradition. This could be achieved, for

example, by providing branded sports bars and a club museum or by organizing fan tournaments in the stadium or arena.

The strong effect of brand benefits on brand attitude highlights the potential value of a benefit-based positioning of a team brand. The attachment of fans and their pronounced loyalty propensity is the most important asset of a team-sport organization. Sports clubs should emphasize the creation and conservation of fan loyalty through well-planned interactions designed to deliver extraordinary experiences. Cross-selling activities are promising strategies in this direction, provided that the new products are based on the brand's key benefits (with a high fit), and this link is communicated by marketing. Future research should test the effectiveness of varied marketing tactics in constructing brand-marketing tools, particularly with reference to brand image and fan loyalty.

Examining possible moderators of the proposed relationships (e.g., involvement, commitment, identification, gender, social class) also represents an important direction for future research. Learning more about the drivers of brand loyalty in different segments and a deeper understanding of the benefit structure of different fan types would provide sport marketers with the necessary insight to segment their marketing strategies. The nature and importance of attributes and benefits related to a team brand might also differ across sports and cultures.

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Appendix

Table A1 Operationalization of Brand Image

Product-related attributes	Non-product-related attributes	Benefits
Team*	Logo and club colors ^a	Identification ^b
Head coach*	Club history and tradition ^a	(Pride in place ^b)
Success*	(Management ^a)	Peer-group acceptance ^b
Star player*	Stadium ^a	Escape/Get away from it all ^b
Team performance*	(Club culture and values ^a)	Socializing/Companionship ^b
	Fans ^a	Emotions ^b
	(Sponsor or owner ^a)	Nostalgia/Evoke fond memories ^b
	(Regional provenance ^a)	Entertainment ^b

Attitudes:

My favorite club is unique.

My favorite club is trustworthy.

I have positive feelings toward my favorite club.

I like my favorite club.

^aEach of these items was measured by its strength (i.e., “If you hear or read about your favorite club, how strongly do you associate the following attributes/aspects with the club?” [1 = *do not associate at all*; 7 = *strongly associate*]), favorability (i.e., “How do you feel about the following attributes of your favorite club?” [1 = *extremely negative*, 7 = *extremely positive*]), and uniqueness (i.e., “In comparison with other clubs, how unique are the following attributes/aspects with respect to your favorite club?” [1 = *not unique at all*, 7 = *extremely unique*]).

^bEach of these items was measured by its strength and uniqueness. All other items are measured on 7-point scales with the end points 1 = *strongly disagree* and 7 = *strongly agree*. Items in parentheses were eliminated.

Operationalization of Fan Loyalty

Psychological Commitment

I am a real fan of my favorite club. (1)

I am very committed to my favorite club. (1)

There is nothing that could change my commitment to my favorite club. (2)

I will not change my affiliation from my favorite club to another club in the future just because it is not successful anymore. (2)

I would defend my favorite team in public even if this caused problems. (3)

I will not change my affiliation from my favorite club to another club just because my friends try to convince me to. (3)

It is really important to me that my favorite club continues playing in the major league. (4)

The long-term success of my favorite team is important to me. (4)

Behavioral Loyalty

I have often attended games of my favorite team live in the stadium. / I will often attend games of my favorite team live in the stadium.

I have watched games of my favorite team on TV. / I will watch games of my favorite team on TV.

I have often followed reports about my favorite team's players, coaches, managers etc. in the media. / I will often follow reports about my favorite team's players, coaches, managers etc. in the media.

I have purchased a lot of club-related merchandise. / I will purchase a lot of club-related merchandise.

I often wore the colors and/or the logo of my favorite team. / I will often wear the colors and/or the logo of my favorite team.

I have often participated in discussions about my favorite team. / I will often participate in discussions about my favorite team.

(Note. All items are measured on 7-point scales with the end points ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Items in parentheses were eliminated.)