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



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## ABSTRACT

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

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## 1. Introduction

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

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

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

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Fan club membership

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

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

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