



The interrelationships between football fans' psychological connection to a team, perception of sponsorship and sponsorship response in the context of new team and new sponsor

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Abstract

This paper aims to propose an integrated model to evaluate sponsorship effectiveness in newly organized professional football teams. To achieve this, the effects of fan identification as the psychological connection of sports fans with a sports team, on sponsorship perceptions, such as attitude towards the sponsor and brand image, and sponsorship response, such as purchasing intention, were examined. In addition, the mediating role of consumer sponsor perceptions in the relationship between fan identification and purchasing intention was tested. The data were gathered from 255 fans of Alagöz Holding Iğdır football club. Confirmatory factor analyses (Amos 23 IBM) and PROCESS analyses (SPSS) was conducted in statistics. The findings supported our model, which proposes that fan identification has a direct impact on sponsorship perceptions and response, and that sponsorship perceptions mediate the relationship between fan identification and sponsor response. The main contribution of this paper is the incorporation of fan identification, attitude towards sponsor, sponsor brand image, and purchase intentions within an integrated sponsorship model, and testing of their interrelations which have not been empirically tested in the context of a newly formed professional football team. Practical implications for both sports team marketers and sponsors are explained in the paper.

Keywords: Fan identification, football fans, football teams, sponsorship outcomes, sport sponsorship

Yeni takım ve yeni sponsor bağlamında spor taraftarlarının takımla psikolojik bağları, sponsorluk algısı ve sponsorluk tepkileri arasındaki ilişkiler

Öz

Bu makalenin amacı, yeni organize olmuş profesyonel spor takımlarında sponsorluk etkinliğini değerlendirmek için bütünlük bir model önermektir. Bunu başarmak için, spor taraftarlarının bir takımla psikolojik bağı olarak taraftar özdeşleşmesinin, sponsora yönelik tutum ve marka imajı gibi sponsorluk algıları ve satın alma niyeti gibi sponsorluk tepkisi üzerindeki etkileri incelenmiştir. Ayrıca taraftar özdeşleşmesi ile satın alma niyeti arasındaki ilişkide tüketici sponsor algılarının aracılık rolü test edilmiştir. Veriler, Alagöz Holding Iğdır futbol kulübünün 255 taraftarından toplanmıştır. İstatistiklerde doğrulayıcı faktör analizleri (Amos 23 IBM) ve PROCESS analizleri (SPSS) yapılmıştır. Bulgular, taraftar özdeşleşmesinin sponsorluk algısı ve tepkileri üzerinde doğrudan bir etkiye sahip olduğu ve sponsorluk algılarının taraftar özdeşleşmesi ile sponsor tepkisi arasındaki ilişkiye aracılık ettiğini öneren modeli desteklemiştir. Bu çalışmanın temel katkısı, taraftar özdeşleşmesinin, sponsora yönelik tutumun, sponsor marka imajının ve satın alma niyetlerinin bütünlük bir sponsorluk modeline dahil edilmesi ve yeni kurulan bir profesyonel spor takımı bağlamında ampirik olarak test edilmemiş olan ilişkilerinin test edilmesidir. Hem spor takımı pazarlamacıları hem de sponsorlar için pratik çıkarımlar makalede açıklanmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Futbol takımları, futbol taraftarları, sponsorluk çıktıları, spor sponsorluğu, taraftar özdeşleşmesi

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INTRODUCTION

Sponsor companies investing in sports team hope to transfer the positive image and emotional bond that fans hold towards their team to their own brand (Madrigal, 2001). From this point of view, some of the ways to evaluate the effectiveness of sponsorship activities are to measure whether fans have developed a positive attitude and a positive image towards sponsor brands and an intention to purchase its products, which are also the main goals that a sponsor company will want to achieve through sponsorship. Although the sponsorship perceptions of fans and their responses to sponsorship communication were documented in sports literature on established football teams (Biscaia et al., 2013) and sports events (Başar, 2018), however, there is a lack of evidence on how efficiently sponsorship works in newly organized sports team and their fans. In addition, fan identification, which has received little attention in the sponsorship literature, as well as brand image and attitude towards the sponsor, have only been directly associated and in separate studies with purchase intention, one of the most admirable gains of sponsor companies. However, what role these variables play in an integrated model in achieving purchasing intention has not been investigated in detail through mediation analyses that can also address the indirect relationships between them. Thus, this study examines the interrelationships between the psychological connection of sports fans with a team, their attitudes and their response to the sponsor in an integrated model to better understand the effectiveness of sponsorship in the context of the newly established professional football team and its sponsor, and it aims to close the gap mentioned in the literature. Particularly, the objectives of the current study were set as follows:

- 1. To propose an integrated model to evaluate sponsorship effectiveness in newly organized professional football teams;*
- 2. To examine the impact of football fans' psychological connection to a team on their sponsorship perceptions and response;*
- 3. To examine the mediating role of sponsorship perceptions between football fans' psychological connection to a team and sponsorship response;*
- 4. To examine the mediating role of sponsor brand image perceptions between attitude to sponsor and sponsorship response.*

The conceptual framework of this study is based on the model of Speed and Thomson (2000), who extended the classical conditioning theory to explain the effects of sports sponsorship perception on multidimensional sports sponsorship response. They suggested that

pairing a sponsor as a conditional stimulus with a sports event that is an unconditional stimulus can help create a positive response for customers. According to Speed and Thomson (2000), through sponsorship, company A and event X will be shown to the target audience as two interrelated stimuli so that learning through classical conditioning will be provided and ultimately the desired sponsorship response (e.g. awareness, purchase intention) will be achieved. Briefly, in Speed and Thomson's (2000) model, it is suggested that consumer responses to sports sponsorship, such as interest, preferability and usage, will be affected by attitudes towards the event and sponsor and the perception of fit between the sponsor and the event, which are the result of the exposure to sponsorship. In Speed and Thomson's (2000) model, although a customer's perception of sponsorship and sponsorship responses were operationalized and tested, customer's exposure to sponsorship and its role on customer perceptions and sponsorship responses were not tested. Real fans with high level of team identification follow their teams' matches more and thus constitute the segment most exposed to sponsorship activities and messages. From this point of view, fan identification is operationalized in this study to represent the customer's exposure to sponsorship. Also, brand image, defined as perceptions reflected by a brand's associations held in consumers' memory according to the associative network memory (Keller, 1993), is added to the model as one of the sponsorship perceptions besides attitude towards the sponsor brand. Brand association, and thus brand image, can be linked if a brand is associated with a celebrity or sporting event through sponsorship (Keller, 1993), resulting in image transfer from the sports brand to the sponsoring brand (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999). These arguments justify the rationale for including sponsor brand image in this model. Based on the sponsorship literature, it is proposed in the model of this research (see figure 1) that the fan identification in the context of newly established professional football teams directly leads to perceptions and responses to sponsorship and that sponsorship perceptions also mediate between fan identification and sponsorship response.

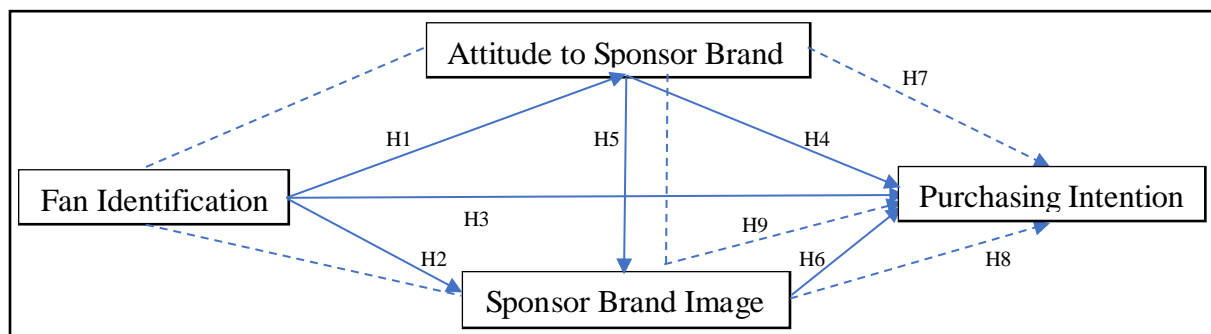


Figure 1. The proposed research model

The fan identification to a team, that is, consumers' psychological connection with a team (Lock et al., 2014), is a term generally used to express the level of attachment (Ngan et al., 2011) or emotional involvement (Branscombe & Wann 1991) of the spectators to their team. This connectedness to a team makes identified fans to recognize themselves as in group members (Lee & Ferreira, 2011), and similarly, they recognize sponsor companies that support their favorite team to achieve their goals as an essential partner of the team and also in group members (Chih-Hung et al., 2012). Namely, Madrigal (2001), based on the view of Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) that importance of beliefs can lead to firm attitudes, argues that people (e.g. fans) who have favorable beliefs about the benefits and importance of corporate sponsorship will develop a positive attitude towards the sponsor (the first variable of consumers' perception of sponsorship). Sports sponsorship promotes the belief that the sponsor's investment benefits the team, as opposed to advertising, which serves more advertiser interests and is therefore perceived as selfish, thereby causing the sponsor's effort to be perceived as goodwill among fans while at the same time causing gratitude (Meenaghan, 2001), indeed. Thus, in group bias and perception of goodwill created by sponsor through supporting the team may contribute among identified fans, which are being most aware of the sponsor's investment and the benefits arising, to develop positive attitude and behavior towards the sponsor company as in group member (Meenaghan, 2001). It is also argued that fan identification is a critical construct in determining the behavioral motivations and constraints of sports consumers (Laverie & Arnett, 2000) and that fan behaviors such as consumption probability increase in parallel with identification (Burton et al., 2019). Then, it is possible to say that sponsor brands that establishing a correct association with a sports team can achieve beneficial results (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003), such as positive brand attitude, brand image and intention to purchase their products. In this sense, prior literature showed the predicting role of fan identification on some sponsorship outcomes like sponsor recognition, attitude towards sponsors, sponsor patronage, satisfaction with sponsor and purchase intention from the sponsor in the context of a university football game (Madrigal, 2001; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003), direct and indirect effect of fan identification on attitude towards sponsors and purchase intention in the context where the sponsor and sponsored are a western-based team but fans are Asian satellite fans (Chih-Hung et al., 2012); and on attitude towards sponsor and purchase intention in the context of big three soccer clubs (i.e. Galatasaray, Fenerbahçe, Beşiktaş) in Turkish Super League in the sample of university students (Enginkaya, 2014). In addition, it is shown in the context of fans of professional basketball (Tsiotsou & Alexandris, 2009) and soccer teams that are highly attached

(Koronios et al., 2016) and involved (Ko et al., 2008) fans demonstrated an enormous positive image to sponsor (the second variable of consumers' perception of sponsorship) of their team and purchasing intention (sponsorship response variable). The sponsor brand image has been viewed and tested as a crucial element in evaluating sponsorship effectiveness by some authors in the literature (Laroche et al., 1996; Pope & Voges, 2000; Alay, 2008; Tsiotsou & Alexandris, 2009). These arguments suggest a possible linkage between fan identification and attitude towards the sponsor brand, sponsor brand image and purchasing intention. Therefore, based on previous studies, the following hypotheses have been formed to get insight into the consumers' psychological connection-sponsorship perceptions linkage in the context of a new professional team.

H₁: Fan identification has a positive and significant direct association with attitude toward sponsor brand in newly organized professional team context.

H₂: Fan identification has a positive and significant direct association with sponsor brand image in newly organized professional team context.

H₃: Fan identification has a positive and significant direct association with purchasing intention of sponsor brand in newly organized professional team context.

The attitude towards a sponsor, an essential factor for assessing sponsorship effectiveness (Biscaia et al., 2013), is referred to a consumer's favorable tendency towards a sponsor (Meenaghan, 2001) and their overall evaluation of a sponsoring brand (Keller, 2003). An individual's attitude toward an object has significant importance in predicting individual's behavioral intention to that object (Ajzen, 2001), and attitudes that are perceived as important are more likely to use in the processing of information, the formation of intention and acting (Madrigal, 2001). In the context of sport sponsorship, Harvey et al. (2006) state that a positive attitude leads to a sense of obligation for consuming and purchasing the brands and products of the sponsor for demonstrating support. In support of the latter, Crimmins and Horn (1996) pointed out that sixty per cent of the United States adult population stated that they would buy the products of those companies if they sponsor the Olympics and that true fans may reward a sponsor with their patronage. In literature, the relationship between attitude towards sponsors and purchasing intention was revealed by fans of a professional soccer team which is competing in the Portuguese top league with several national and international titles (Biscaia et al., 2013) on satellite Thai fans who watch European soccer teams (Chih-Hung Wang et al., 2012), on a sporting event (Nguyen & Vu, 2022), and for understanding of how local consumers perceive

foreign firms' sponsorship to an Olympic event (Meng-Lewis et al., 2013), but not on fans of new professional football teams. So, drawing upon previous views and studies, we established following hypothesis.

H₄: Attitude towards sponsor brand has a positive and significant direct association with purchasing intention of sponsor brand in newly organized professional team context.

Brand attitude is also seen as one of the antecedents of the brand image, which is formed by consumers as a result of decoding and interpretation of brand signals (Kapferer, 1992; Keller, 1993) and which is one of the goals expected to be achieved as a result of sponsorship (Speed & Thompson, 2000). Keller (1993) pointed out the importance of leveraging secondary associations such as celebrity endorsers or an event (e.g. a sporting event), particularly for building brand image if there is a lack of brand image. It is suggested that by linking the brand with a well-known celebrity or event, the positive associations (i.e. image) and attitude held by consumers about the celebrity or event can be transferred to the linked brand in a favorable, strong and unique way (Keller, 1993). In their experimental studies, Gwinner and Eaton (1999) showed that subjects exposed to sponsors at different sports events were more likely to report similarities in brand-event personality components than subjects not exposed to sponsors, based on Keller's (1993) view, and they suggested that sponsorship resulted in image transmission. Logically, it is expected that identified fans who are naturally more exposed to the sponsor brand than casual audiences and who have a positive attitude towards the sponsor brands due to the perception of goodwill tend to interpret the sponsor brands' contribution to their teams positively and will decode the brand's sponsorship as a positive brand sign. Ultimately, the process depicted here indicates that the positive attitude of the fans towards the sponsor brand can translate into a positive brand image perception. The studies in the literature support these views. For example, the relationship between brand attitude and brand image is revealed in different product categories (Faircloth et al., 2012) and a case of a professional Basketball event (Alexandris et al., 2007). Furthermore, the positive and direct relationship between brand image and purchasing intention was revealed in fans of an established professional basketball team (Tsiotsou & Alexandris, 2009), female fans in the European Woman Volleyball Championship (Alay, 2008), on fans of an established soccer team (Koronios et al., 2016) but not on fans of new professional football teams. So, drawing upon previous views and studies, we established the following hypotheses.

H₅: Attitude toward sponsor brand has a positive and significant direct association with sport brand image of sponsor brand in newly organized professional team context.

H₆: Sponsor brand image has a positive and significant direct association with purchasing intention of sponsor brand in newly organized professional team context.

In the literature, the results of some studies evaluating team identification as an antecedent of attitude towards sponsor and purchasing intention and testing the direct effect of team identification on these variables contradict each other. For example, Gwinner and Swanson (2003) found that team identification has a direct and positive effect on purchasing intention and attitude towards the sponsor in the context of university students, however, Enginkaya (2014) found that while fan identification had a direct and positive effect on the attitude towards the sponsor, it did not affect the purchasing intention in the context of university students. In addition, it was known that in some studies conducted on consumers, the direct relationship between attitude and purchasing intention showed a low correlation (Leippe & Elkin, 1987; Glasman & Albarracin, 2006). These results suggest the possibility that other variables may play a role between fan identification and purchasing intention, and sponsor attitude and purchasing intention. On the other hand, the direct effects of important variables such as attitude to sponsor, brand image of sponsor (Chih-Hung Wang et al., 2012; Biscaia et al., 2013; Koronios et al., 2016), event involvement (Meng-Lewis et al., 2013), attitude toward event (Alexandris et al., 2007), team attachment (Koronios et al., 2016) on purchasing intention in the sports sponsorship literature have been examined, however, how these variables may mediate on purchasing intention has not been investigated. In particular, the role of the sponsor brand image and attitude towards the sponsor brand in the relationship between fan identification and purchasing intention and the role of the sponsor brand image in the relationship between the attitude towards the sponsor brand and purchasing intention has not been examined so far. Therefore, to better understand the relationships between the psychological connections of sports consumers to their teams, their sponsorship perceptions and sponsorship responses, and how these variables interact to achieve purchasing intention in the presence of each other, we also attempted to examine the mediation relationships in this study. For this purpose, the following hypotheses were formed.

H₇: Sponsor brand attitude mediates the relationship between fan identification and purchasing intention of sponsor brand in newly organized professional team context.

H₈: Sponsor brand image mediates the relationship between fan identification and purchasing intention of sponsor brand in newly organized professional team context.

H₉: Sponsor brand image mediates the relationship between attitude toward sponsor brand and purchasing intention of sponsor brand in newly organized professional team context.

METHOD

Research group and setting

Data were gathered from fans of Iğdır Football Club in May 2023. 255 local fans ($X_{age}=25.56\pm 6.95$) aged between 18-56, and living in Iğdır city participated in this research. Table 1 provides details about the demographics of the participants.

The present research was conducted within the scope of "Alagöz Holding Iğdır Football Club", competing in the Turkish Professional 3rd Football League. Iğdır Football Club was founded in 2016 with the name "76 Iğdır Belediye Spor". After the owner of Alagöz Holding became the president of the club in the 2020-2021 season, and the holding became the sponsor of the club, the club moved from the amateur league to the 3rd Professional Football League in Turkey for the first time. At the end of the 2021 season, the name of the club was changed to "Alagöz Holding Iğdır Football Club" (Alagöz Holding Iğdır Futbol Kulübü, n.d). The club shows a very successful performance to be promoted to the 2nd Turkish Professional Football League in the 2022-2023 season and is strongly supported by the local people. Therefore, the chosen research setting constitutes the appropriate example for this paper to achieve its purpose.

Table 1. Demographics of the participants

Demographic Variables	N	%	Demographic Variables	N	%
Gender			Education		
Men	227	89.0	Elementary school	27	10.6
Woman	28	11.0	High school	121	47.5
Total	255	100	University	97	38.0
			Graduate	10	3.9
			Total	255	100
Reason for choosing the team			Income		
Family	78		Below minimum wage	113	44.3
Media	4		Equal to minimum wage	67	26.3
Club colors	6		Over minimum wage	61	23.9
Popularity of the team	27		Well above minimum wage	14	5.5
Local reasons	140		Total	255	100
Total	255				

Data collection tools

Data collection tools consisting of multiple choice and open-ended questions have been designed to collect data on demographic variables as well as questions measuring the fan identification levels of Alagöz Holding Iğdır Football Club fans, their attitudes towards the

company brand sponsoring their teams, their perceptions of the sponsor brand image and their purchasing intention the sponsor brand's products. A five-point Likert type scales, designed as 1 “strongly disagree” and 5 “strongly agree” were used to measure attitude towards sponsor (4 items), sponsor brand image (6 items) and purchasing intention (3 items) while a Likert type scale ranging from 1 (not important/ not at all a fan/ never/ do not dislike etc.) to 8 (very important/ very much a fan/ almost every day/ dislike very much/ always etc.), was used to measure fan identification. Attitude towards sponsor and purchase intention were measured with Speed and Thompson's scales (2000), and sponsor brand image was measured with Hoeffler and Keller's (2002) scale, which all were adapted into Turkish by Özer (2011). Fan identification was measured with Wann and Branscombe's scale (1993), which was adapted into Turkish by Günay and Tiryaki (2003).

Data collection

The data were collected online, which started with the convenience sampling method and continued with the snowball sampling method after obtaining approval from the Ethics Committee of Iğdır University (05.05.2023; No: 2023/9). Participants selected the voluntary participation option while receiving informed consent that explain the purpose of the research. Hair et al. (2010) suggest a sample size between 100 and 200 questionnaires for confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), which shows that the sample size reached for this study is sufficient for the analyses to be made.

Data analysis

The descriptive statistics and data scanning were performed with the IBM SPSS 26 program, while CFA, which is used to test the structural validity of the constructs, was performed with the Amos 24 statistical program. In addition, three separate PROCESS analyses (Hayes, 2013) were conducted to investigate the research hypotheses and the mediation analyses. Missing values and the distribution of variables were initially examined and no missing values were found, but in some items, the multivariate normality was violated. Therefore, as suggested by Byrne (2001) for this kind of case, and to assess the significance of direct and indirect effects, bootstrapping method with the 5000 re-sampling for the 95% corrected confidence interval was used in mediation tests (Hayes, 2013). For an effect to be statistically significant, the upper or lower 95% confidence interval is expected to not contain zero (Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

FINDINGS

CFA results

In the first CFA, based on the modification indices, two items (Iden3 and Iden6) had to be removed from the Fan Identification scale. Afterwards, the model demonstrated good fit ($\chi^2 = 291.454$; $df = 0.113$; $p < 0.001$; $\chi^2/df = 2.579$; SRMR = 0.052; IFI = 0.933; TLI = 0.918 and CFI = 0.963; RMSEA = 0.079). CFA results were given in Table 2. Item loadings for all scales were significant ($p < 0.001$), above 0.50 (Hair et al., 2010) and ranged between 0.552 to 0.924. The composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) were, respectively, above 0.50 and 0.70 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), which indicated convergent validity and reliability of the scales. The discriminant validity also was supported by the fact that all squared correlations between the factors were lower than the AVE of the factors (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The means, standard deviations, correlations, and squared correlations between the factors, the AVE and CR scores were also presented in Table 3.

Table 2. Confirmatory factor analysis result

Factors / Items	α	ML Bootstrapping Estimation (with 500 resampling)				
		≥ 0.60	$\beta \geq 0.50$	$\beta_{\text{mean}} \geq 0.50$	S. E	BCPM 95% CI low / CI high
Fan identification	0.78					
<i>Iden1</i>		0.621***	0.622	0.102	0.371 / 0.770	
<i>Iden2</i>		0.590***	0.593	0.064	0.386 / 0.640	
<i>Iden4</i>		0.889***	0.889	0.041	0.796 / 0.962	
<i>Iden5</i>		0.822***	0.822	0.040	0.726 / 0.886	
<i>Iden7</i>		0.552***	0.546	0.066	0.419 / 0.676	
Sponsor brand image	0.87					
<i>Imj1</i>		0.796***	0.794	0.043	0.693 / 0.864	
<i>Imj2</i>		0.808***	0.806	0.040	0.713 / 0.872	
<i>Imj3</i>		0.797***	0.793	0.046	0.623 / 0.807	
<i>Imj4</i>		0.811***	0.811	0.063	0.606 / 0.857	
<i>Imj5</i>		0.761***	0.762	0.042	0.665 / 0.831	
Attitude towards sponsor Brand	0.93					
<i>Att1</i>		0.856***	0.856	0.031	0.788 / 0.908	
<i>Att2</i>		0.894***	0.893	0.028	0.832 / 0.941	
<i>Att3</i>		0.924***	0.925	0.013	0.894 / 0.946	
<i>Att4</i>		0.836***	0.836	0.033	0.757 / 0.890	
Purchasing intention	0.82					
<i>Purc1</i>		0.766***	0.772	0.052	0.641 / 0.851	
<i>Purc2</i>		0.792***	0.794	0.047	0.687 / 0.875	
<i>Purc3</i>		0.790***	0.791	0.063	0.628 / 0.883	

a: factor loadings were fixed to the value of 1.0; **ML:** maximum likelihood estimation; **β :** original sample estimates of standardized regression weights; *****:** $P < 0.001$; **β_{mean} :** bootstrapped estimates of standardized regression weights; **SE:** standard error of bootstrapped estimates; **BCPM:** bias corrected percentile method; **CI:** confidence intervals.

Table 3. Means, standard deviations, correlations, squared correlations, average variance extracted and composite reliability scores

Factors	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	AVE ≥ 0.50	CR ≥ 0.60
Fan Identification	7.35	0.844	1.00			0.501	0.829
Sponsor Brand Image	4.48	0.674	0.226 (0.051)	1.00		0.632	0.896
Attitude towards Sponsor Brand	4.55	0.727	0.235 (0.055)	0.793 (0.628)	1.00	0.771	0.931
Purchasing Intention	4.44	0.752	0.153 (0.023)	0.780 (0.608)	0.530 (0.280)	0.613	0.82

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

Hypotheses results

The first PROCESS analysis was conducted to investigate the H₁, H₃, and H₄ and the potential role of attitude toward the sponsor brand as a mediator in the relationship between fan identification and purchasing intention (H₇). The results were given in Table 4. Accordingly, in “Model 1” it was shown that there was a significant and positive direct association between fan identification and attitude toward sponsor brand ($b = 0.182$; $t = 3.44$; $p < 0.001$), which supports hypothesis H₁. It was determined in “Model 3” that fan identification is associated with purchasing intention directly and positively ($b = 0.12$; $t = 0.56$; $p < 0.05$), which supports hypothesis H₃. In “Model 2”, it was shown that attitude toward the sponsor brand was associated with purchasing intention directly and positively ($b = 0.47$; $t = 7.87$; $p < 0.001$), which supports hypothesis H₄. In “Model 2”, the combined effects of fan identification and attitude toward the sponsor brand on purchasing intention were also tested. Accordingly, the direct effect of fan identification together with attitude toward the sponsor brand on purchasing intention was positive but not significant anymore ($b = 0.035$, $t = 0.51$, $p > 0.001$) as it is in “Model 3”. When Bootstrapping results for the indirect effect were examined in Table 4, it was shown that the indirect effect was significant ($b = 0.085$; $SE = 0.028$ [%95 LLCI, ULCI) = (0.029-0.140)]), which supports the hypothesis H₇.

Table 4. The mediating role of attitude toward sponsor brand in the relationship between fan identification and purchasing intention

	Bootstrapped CI 95%					R ²
	B	SE	T	LL	UL	
<i>Model 1</i>						
Outcome: attitude toward sponsor brand						
Fan identification (H ₁)	0.182***	0.053	3.44	0.078	0.029	0.045
<i>Model 2</i>						
Outcome: purchasing intention						
Fan identification	0.035	0.051	0.676	-0.066	0.135	0.21
Attitude toward sponsor brand (H ₄)	0.47***	0.060	7.87	0.35	0.583	
<i>Model 3</i>						
Outcome: purchasing intention						
Fan identification (H ₃)-Total effect model	0.12*	0.056	2.15	0.010	0.229	0.018
<i>Bootstrapping results for the indirect effect (H7)</i>						
	0.085	0.028		0.029	0.140	

N = 255; B = Unstandardized regression coefficients; CI = Confidence interval; LL = Lower level; UL = Upper level; ***= p < 0.001; *= p < 0.05.

The second PROCESS analysis was conducted to investigate the H₂, H₆ and the potential role of sponsor brand image as a mediator on the relationship between fan identification and purchasing intention (H₈). The results were given in Table 5. Accordingly, in “Model 1”, it was shown that there was a significant and positive direct association between fan identification and sponsor brand image (b = 0.175; t = 3.57; p<0.001), which supports the hypothesis H₂. In “Model 2”, it was shown that sponsor brand image is associated with purchasing intention directly and positively (b = 0.753; t = 14.12; p<0.001), which supports hypothesis H₆. In “Model 2”, the combined effects of fan identification and sponsor brand image on purchasing intention were also tested. Accordingly, the direct effect of fan identification together with sponsor brand image on purchasing intention was negative but not significant anymore (b = -0.012, t = -0.286, p > 0.001) as it is in “Model 3”. When Bootstrapping results for the indirect effect were examined in Table 5, it was shown that the indirect effect was significant (b = 0.132; SE = 0.041 [%95 LLCI, ULCI) = (0.052-0.212)]), which supports the hypothesis H₈.

Table 5. The mediating role of sponsor brand image in the relationship between fan identification and purchasing intention

	Bootstrapped CI 95%					R ²
	B	SE	T	LL	UL	
<i>Model 1</i>						
Outcome: sponsor brand image						
Fan identification (H ₂)	0.175***	0.050	3.57	0.078	0.027	0.048
<i>Model 2</i>						
Outcome: purchasing intention						
Fan identification	-0.012	0.043	-0.286	-0.096	0.072	0.45
Sponsor brand image (H ₆)	0.753***	0.053	14.12	0.65	0.86	
<i>Model 3</i>						
Outcome: purchasing intention						
Fan identification (H ₃)- Total effect model	0.12*	0.056	2.15	0.010	0.229	0.18
<i>Bootstrapping results for the indirect effect (H₈)</i>						
	0.132	0.041		0.052	0.212	

N = 255; B = Unstandardized regression coefficients; CI = Confidence interval; LL = Lower level; UL = Upper level; ***= p < 0.001; *= p < 0.05.

The third PROCESS analysis was conducted to investigate the H₅ and the potential role of sponsor brand image as a mediator on the relationship between attitude toward the sponsor brand and purchasing intention (H₉). The results were given in Table 6. Accordingly, in “Model

1” it was shown that there was a significant and positive direct association between attitude toward sponsorship and sponsor brand image ($b = 0.645$; $t = 15.40$; $p < 0.001$), which supports hypothesis H₅. In “Model 2”, the combined effects of attitude toward sponsor brand and sponsor brand image on purchasing intention were also tested. Accordingly, the direct effect of attitude toward sponsor brand together with sponsor brand image on purchasing intention was negative but not significant anymore ($b = -0.018$, $t = -0.261$, $p > 0.001$) as it is in “Model 3”. When Bootstrapping results for the indirect effect were examined in Table 7, it was shown that the indirect effect was significant ($b = 0.476$; $SE = 0.057$ [%95 LLCI, ULCI) = (0.370-0.594)], which supports the hypothesis H₉.

Table 6. The mediating role of sponsor brand image in the relationship between attitude towards sponsor brand and purchasing intention

	Bootstrapped CI 95%					R ²
	B	SE	T	LL	UL	
<i>Model 1</i>						
Outcome: sponsor brand image						
Attitude toward sponsor brand (H ₅)	0.645***	0.042	15.40	0.563	0.728	0.48
<i>Model 2</i>						
Outcome: purchasing intention						
Attitude toward sponsor brand	-0.018	0.067	-0.261	-0.150	0.115	0.45
Sponsor brand image	0.763***	0.073	10.53	0.62	0.91	
<i>Model 3</i>						
Outcome: purchasing intention						
Attitude toward sponsor brand- Total effect model	0.475***	0.058	8.21	0.361	0.589	0.21
<i>Bootstrapping results for the indirect effect (H₉)</i>						
	0.476	0.057		0.370	0.594	

N = 255; B = Unstandardized regression coefficients; CI = Confidence interval; LL = Lower level; UL = Upper level; ***= $p < 0.001$; *= $p < 0.05$.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Developing a positive attitude and brand image towards a sponsor brand, and as a result, the development of purchasing intention in sports consumers towards the sponsor company brand is considered the key factor of a successful sponsorship (Speed & Thompson, 2000; Alexandris et al., 2007). Thus, the aim of this paper was to propose an integrated model to evaluate sponsorship effectiveness in newly organized professional football teams through examining the interrelationships between sport fans' psychological connection to a team, perception of sponsorship and sponsorship response. The findings supported the proposed model and all hypotheses of the research. According to the results, it was revealed in the context of newly organized professional football teams that fan identification as fans' psychological connection to a team was associated positively, significantly and directly with attitude toward sponsor and sponsor brand image, which are sport consumers' perceptions of sponsorship. Fan identification was also associated positively, significantly and directly with purchase intention. These results indicate that new football team fans with a high level of identification are more likely to exhibit positive attitudes to the sponsor brand and have a positive brand image and

purchase intention from the sponsor's products. These results are similar to the findings of Madrigal, (2001); Gwinner and Swanson, (2003); Chih-Hung Wang et al. (2012); Koronios et al. (2016) who demonstrated that fan identification or team attachment had a positive, significant and direct impact on attitude to sponsor, sponsor brand image and purchase intention. However, it differs from the finding in Enginkaya's (2014) study, which showed that fan identification did not affect purchase intention in university students. The reason for this difference can be attributed to the samples used in the studies, which were mentioned in the literature. In this study it was also revealed respectively that attitude to sponsor was associated positively, significantly and directly with purchasing intention, which is confirmed by the findings of Chih-Hung Wang et al. (2012); Biscaia et al. (2013); Nguyen and Vu, (2022); and also with sponsor brand image which is similar to the findings of Faircloth et al. (2012) and Alexandris et al. (2007) but contradict with the findings of Alexandris et al. (2007) that revealed no significant relationship between attitude to the event and sponsor brand image in the context of All-Star Basketball games. The fact that the results are contradict can be attributed to the fact that the sponsor sponsoring All-Star Basketball games could not leveraged secondary associations and therefore could not transfer the image from the sports event to the sponsor brand. Looking at the statistical results, it is possible to say that the attitude towards the sponsor is a stronger variable than fan identification in explaining variance both in the sponsor brand image perception and the purchase intention and that the fans who have a strong attitude towards the sponsor can also develop a stronger brand image and purchasing intention towards the sponsor.

The brand image of a sponsor also was associated positively, significantly and directly with purchase intention, which was supported by the findings of Laroche et al. (1996), Alay, (2008), Tsiotsou and Alexandris, (2009) and Koronios et al. (2016). The statistical results of this study showed that the sponsor brand image was the most powerful predictor of purchase intention in the sample of this study. Therefore, it is possible to say that with the increase in the perception of the sponsor brand image of the fans of a new football team, their intention to buy the products of the sponsor brand may increase.

Finally, the other important results obtained in this study, which made this paper unique, were that the attitude to sponsor and the brand image completely mediated the relationship between fan identification and purchase intention, and the brand image completely mediated the relationship between the attitude to the sponsor and the purchase intention. These results are comparable with the findings of Meng-Lewis et al. (2013) who demonstrated that attitudes

to sponsors mediated the effects of event involvement and economic animosity on willingness to buy from the sponsor in the context of foreign sponsors which sponsored The Olympic Partner Program for the 2008 Olympic Games. These results are also similar to the findings of Başar (2018), who demonstrated that attitudes to sponsors mediated the relationship between high perception of event-sponsor fit and purchasing intention in the context of the 2017 European Youth Olympic Festival 2017. The last findings in this study represent the first investigation of the interrelationships among these variables, which may play a key role in sports marketing and evaluating sports sponsorship effectiveness. Based on the results of the mediation analyses, we can say the following. Although fan identification has a direct and significant impact on attitude to the sponsor brand, sponsor brand image and purchasing intention, in the presence of attitude to the sponsor brand and sponsor brand image, fan identification does not have any impact on purchasing intention. In other words, the effect of fan identification on sponsor brand image is realized through sponsor brand attitude, and the effect on purchase intention is realized through sponsor brand attitude and sponsor brand image when all variables in practice. Similarly, although attitude to sponsor has a direct and significant impact on purchasing intention, in the presence of sponsor brand image in practice it is impact on purchasing intention realized indirectly through sponsor brand image. Shortly, we can say that each variable used in the model is an essential variable in evaluating sponsorship effectiveness and developing efficient sponsorship results, especially in the context of newly established professional football teams and their sponsor. Sponsor brand image, however, is stronger in these variables, especially on sponsorship responses, such as purchasing intentions from sponsor brands.

Recommendations

Based on the results of this study, the managerial implications can be summarized as follows: Since fan identification plays an important role in sponsorship effectiveness, efforts to increase and retain as many loyal fans as possible for the managers of football teams can make the new football team appear more attractive to potential sponsors because the larger fan base means more business opportunities for both sides. The managers of sponsor companies, especially the new sponsors that sponsored a new team, also initiate to attract fans to the team's events. For example, they may provide discounted tickets for some events. It may be also a good strategy for sponsor companies' managers that collect detailed data on fans to design better promotion strategies. On the other hand, although a higher fan identification level effectively develops sports consumers' purchasing intention from the sponsor brand, it will only

increase if fans establish a favorable attitude and image toward the sponsor brand. If corporate sponsorship leads to the belief that it benefits the team among the fans and the efforts of the sponsor are perceived as goodwill (Madrigal, 2001), the sponsor companies need to raise this perception of goodwill because it will ultimately lead to a positive attitude towards the sponsor. For example, the sponsoring company may make a deal with local players who are known to be reliable and successful by fans and the local community, which can increase positive attitudes towards the sponsor. Lastly, sponsor companies can offer free small samples to the audience to promote their products, thereby creating associations and sympathy for their brand that will create a positive image of the sponsor.

As with any study, there are limitations of this study and suggestions for future studies. The context of this study was limited to one team and its only main sponsor, which means that results might be influenced by specific characteristics of the team and its sponsor. Future research, further develops this study by extending the teams, sponsors and sport setting. Similarly, although the sample of the study is sufficient for the analysis to give accurate results, it can be suggested that subsequent studies confirm these relationships with larger samples to generalize the results. The purchasing intention is a widely used and accepted variable as a sponsorship response in sports marketing, however, future research may investigate other consumer responses, such as word of mouth and recommendations to expand our understanding of sponsorship response. Lastly, the moderating role of sport team-sponsor fit perception between fan identification and sponsorship perceptions can be investigated for a better understanding of the value of congruence between sponsor and sponsee in newly organized football teams and sponsors.

GENİŞLETİLMİŞ ÖZET

GİRİŞ

Sponsor markalara karşı olumlu bir tutum, imaj ve ürünlerine karşı satın alma niyetini geliştirip geliştirmediklerini ölçmek sponsorluk faaliyetlerinin etkinliğini değerlendirmenin yollarından bazılarıdır. Taraftarların sponsorluk algıları ve sponsorluk iletişimine verdikleri tepkiler, köklü spor takımlarını (Biscaia ve ark., 2013) ve spor etkinliklerini (Başar, 2018) konu alan spor literatüründe belgelenmesine rağmen, yeni kurulmuş takımlarda sponsorluğun ne kadar verimli çalıştığına dair kanıt eksikliği bulunmaktadır. Ayrıca sponsorluk literatüründe çok az ilgi gören taraftar özdeşleşmesinin yanı sıra marka imajı ve sponsora yönelik tutum, sponsor firmaların en taktire şayan kazanımlarından biri olan satın alma niyeti ile ancak doğrudan ve ayrı çalışmalarda ilişkilendirilmiştir. Bütünleşik bir modelde bu değişkenlerin satın alma niyetine ulaşmada nasıl bir rol oynadıkları, aralarındaki dolaylı ilişkileri de ele alabilecek aracılık analizleri ile detaylı olarak araştırılmamıştır. Bu nedenle bu

çalışmada, yeni kurulan profesyonel futbol takımı ve sponsoru bağlamında, sponsorluğun etkinliğini daha iyi anlamak için taraftarların bir takımla psikolojik bağı, sponsora karşı algıları ve tepkileri arasındaki ilişkilerin bütünlük bir modelde incelemesi ve literatürde bahsedilen boşluğun kapatılması amaçlanmaktadır.

YÖNTEM

Araştırmanın verileri, Iğdır Üniversitesi Etik Kurulu'ndan onay alındıktan sonra kolayda örnekleme yöntemi ile başlayan ve kartopu örnekleme yöntemi ile devam eden çevrimiçi ortamda, Mayıs 2023'te 255 yerel Iğdır Futbol Kulübü taraftarından anket aracılığıyla toplanmıştır. Araştırmada, sponsora yönelik tutumu (4 madde), sponsor marka imajını (6 madde) ve satın alma niyetini (3 madde) ölçmek için 1 “kesinlikle katılmıyorum” ve 5 “kesinlikle katılıyorum” şeklinde tasarlanmış beşli Likert tipindeki ölçekler kullanılmıştır. Fan özdeşleşmesi ise, 1 (önemli değil/hiç hayranı değilim/asla/beğenmiyorum vb.) ile 8 (çok önemli/çok hayranım/neredeyse her gün/çok seviyorum/her zaman vb.) arasında değişen tipte bir ölçek ile ölçülmüştür. Sponsora yönelik tutum ve satın alma niyeti Speed ve Thompson (2000); sponsor marka imajı ise Hoeffler ve Keller (2002) tarafından geliştirilmiş ve bu ölçekler Özer (2011) tarafından Türkçeye uyarlanmıştır. Taraftar özdeşleşmesi ise Wann ve Branscombe (1993) tarafından geliştirilmiş ve Günay ve Tiryaki (2003) tarafından Türkçeye uyarlanmıştır. Betimsel istatistikler ve veri taraması IBM SPSS 26 programı ile, yapıların yapısal geçerliliğini test etmek için kullanılan CFA ise Amos 24 istatistik programı ile gerçekleştirilmiştir. Araştırma hipotezlerini ve aracılık analizlerini test etmek için üç ayrı Process (Hayes, 2013) analizi yapılmıştır.

BULGULAR

Bulgular önerilen modeli ve araştırmanın tüm hipotezlerini desteklemiştir. Sonuçlar, yeni kurulmuş profesyonel futbol takımları bağlamında, taraftarların takımlarıyla psikolojik bağı olarak adlandırılan taraftar özdeşleşmesinin, spor tüketicilerinin algıları olarak tarif edilen sponsora yönelik tutum ve sponsor marka imajı ile pozitif, anlamlı ve doğrudan ilişkili olduğunu göstermektedir. Taraftar özdeşleşmesinin aynı zamanda satın alma niyetiyle de olumlu, anlamlı ve doğrudan ilişkili olduğu belirlenmiştir. Sırasıyla, sponsora yönelik tutumun satın alma niyeti ve sponsor marka imajıyla ve sponsor marka imajının satın alma niyetiyle olumlu, anlamlı ve doğrudan ilişkili olduğu ortaya konulmuştur. Son olarak, sponsora yönelik tutum ve marka imajının, taraftar özdeşleşmesi ile satın alma niyeti arasındaki ilişkiye ve sponsor marka imajının ise sponsora yönelik tutum ile satın alma niyeti arasındaki ilişkiye tam aracılık ettiği görülmüştür.

TARTIŞMA VE SONUÇ

Sonuçlar, özdeşleşme düzeyi yüksek yeni spor takımı taraftarlarının, sponsor markaya karşı olumlu tutum sergileme, olumlu bir marka imajına ve sponsorun ürünlerinden satın alma niyetine sahip olma olasılıklarının daha yüksek olduğunu göstermektedir. Bununla beraber hem sponsor marka

imajındaki hem de satın alma niyetindeki değişkenliği açıklamada sponsora yönelik tutumun, taraftar özdeşleşmesinden daha güçlü bir değişken olduğunu ve sponsora karşı güçlü bir tutuma sahip olan taraftarların aynı zamanda sponsora karşı daha güçlü bir imaj algısı ve satın alma niyeti geliştirilebileceğini söylemek mümkündür. Ayrıca, sponsor marka imajının, satın alma niyetinin en güçlü yordayıcısı olmasından dolayı, yeni bir spor takımının taraftarlarının sponsor marka imajına ilişkin algılarının artmasıyla birlikte sponsor markanın ürünlerini satın alma niyetlerinin de artabileceği söylenebilir. Bu araştırmayı önceki araştırmalardan farklı kılan aracılık testi sonuçlarına dayanarak ayrıca şunları söyleyebiliriz. Uygulamada tüm değişkenler göz önünde bulundurulduğunda taraftar özdeşleşmesinin sponsor marka imajı üzerindeki etkisi sponsor marka tutumu aracılığıyla, satın alma niyeti üzerindeki etkisi ise sponsor marka tutumu ve sponsor marka imajı aracılığıyla gerçekleşmektedir. Benzer şekilde, sponsora yönelik tutumun satın alma niyeti üzerinde doğrudan ve anlamlı bir etkisi olmasına rağmen, uygulamada sponsor marka imajının varlığı, sponsor marka imajı aracılığıyla dolaylı olarak satın alma niyeti üzerinde gerçekleşen etkiyi oluşturmaktadır. Kısaca, modelde kullanılan her bir değişkenin, özellikle yeni kurulan profesyonel spor takımları ve sponsorları bağlamında, sponsorluk etkinliğinin değerlendirilmesinde ve verimli sponsorluk sonuçlarının geliştirilmesinde önemli bir değişken olduğunu söyleyebiliriz. Bu çalışmanın sonuçlarına dayanarak yönetimsel çıkarımlar kısaca şu şekilde özetlenebilir: Taraftar özdeşleşmesi sponsorluk etkinliğinde önemli bir rol oynadığından, spor takımlarının yöneticileri için mümkün olduğu kadar çok sayıda sadık taraftarı artırma ve elde tutma çabaları, yeni spor takımını potansiyel sponsorlar için daha çekici gösterebilir çünkü daha büyük taraftar kitlesi, her iki taraf için daha fazla iş fırsatı anlamına gelmektedir. Diğer yandan, kurumsal sponsorluk, taraftarlar arasında takıma fayda sağladığı inancına yol açabileceği ve sponsorun bu çabaları iyi niyet olarak algılanabileceği için (Madrigal, 2001), şirketlerin olumlu bir tutuma yol açması muhtemel olan iyi niyet algısını yükseltmeleri için yollar bulmaları gerekmektedir. Son olarak sponsor firmalar, ürünlerini tanıtmak amacıyla izleyicilere ücretsiz küçük numuneler sunarak, imajlarını güçlendirecek çağrışımları yaratabilir ve markalarına karşı sempati geliştirebilirler.

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KATKI ORANI CONTRIBUTION RATE	AÇIKLAMA EXPLANATION	KATKIDA BULUNANLAR CONTRIBUTORS
Fikir ve Kavramsal Örgü <i>Idea or Notion</i>	Araştırma hipotezini veya fikrini oluşturmak <i>Form the research hypothesis or idea</i>	Kadir YAĞIZ
Tasarım <i>Design</i>	Yöntem ve araştırma desenini tasarlamak <i>To design the method and research design.</i>	Kadir YAĞIZ
Literatür Tarama <i>Literature Review</i>	Çalışma için gerekli literatürü taramak <i>Review the literature required for the study</i>	Kadir YAĞIZ
Veri Toplama ve İşleme <i>Data Collecting and Processing</i>	Verileri toplamak, düzenlemek ve raporlaştırmak <i>Collecting, organizing and reporting data</i>	Kadir YAĞIZ
Tartışma ve Yorum <i>Discussion and Commentary</i>	Elde edilen bulguların değerlendirilmesi <i>Evaluation of the obtained finding</i>	Kadir YAĞIZ
Destek ve Teşekkür Beyanı/ Statement of Support and Acknowledgment		
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Etik Kurul Beyanı/ Statement of Ethics Committee		
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