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Sports consumption behaviors of football fans: the relationship between social identity, team loyalty and behavioral intention toward consumption

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Abstract

Purpose – The study aimed to establish football fans' levels of social identity, team loyalty, and behavioral intentions toward sports consumption and to determine the relationship between these variables using a structural equation model.

Design/methodology/approach – Research methods: The research model was tested by data analysis using AMOS 23.0. The study sample included 518 football fans with mean age 30.87 (±10.15) years. Data were collected using an online questionnaire delivered to football fans via social media.

Findings – The results supported the study hypotheses and showed that social identity and team loyalty had a significant effect on behavioral intention toward sport consumption for football teams. Social identity was found to have a direct effect on sport consumption behaviors. It was further established that team loyalty was a mediator in the relationship between the fans' social identity and behavioral intention toward sports consumption.

Research limitations/implications – The study planned to collect the data at the stadium entrance before the game; however, it was not possible to reach the fans face-to-face due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and therefore, the data were collected online.

Practical implications – By understanding how the extent of social identity affects sports consumption intention, sports club managers can achieve a higher level of fan loyalty to their teams.

Social implications – The present study provides additional insight into the available literature on team identification. It demonstrated that team identification was associated with social identity and that social identity had an impact on sports consumption behaviors.

Originality/value – This study is an original study in that it is a study in which the social identity scale is used together with the variables of team loyalty and sports consumption behavior intention. The findings of this study help understand the processes that shape the behavioral intentions of football fans toward sports consumption. Furthermore, the mediating role of the developed model was tested using team loyalty.

Keywords Social identity, Team loyalty, Sports consumption behavior, Team identification

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

An adequate understanding of the factors that motivate sport consumers is important for sports managers (Samra and Wos, 2014). A better understanding of the factors that affect sports consumption would improve the efficiency of communication between consumers and manufacturers, which, in turn, would have an impact on all marketing activities of sports organizations, sports businesses, or sports teams. This can encourage individuals to go to football stadiums or basketball courts, resulting not only in increased ticket income but also

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in an additional source of income for that organization or team. Therefore, understanding sports consumption behaviors or the factors affecting consumer behaviors is directly or indirectly beneficial to sports teams or sports organizations (Cunningham and Kwon, 2003). However, each sports fan has a different degree of team loyalty and different consumption behaviors.

Sports fan loyalty is important for reaching large audiences since loyal sports fans are unique consumers (Samra and Wos, 2014; Tapp and Clowes, 2000). Several industries face the challenge of maintaining brand loyalty among their customers (Samra and Wos, 2014), while even the teams with a long and poor record of accomplishment in the sports industry have fans with a lifetime of great loyalty (Bristow and Sebastian, 2001). In addition to loyalty, among the factors affecting sports consumption behaviors is also the social identity that is developed by the fans on a group basis. However, social identity is closely associated with team identification.

According to the social identity theory, a social group is two or more individuals who share a common social identity, and individuals' definition and categorization of the characteristics of social groups become part of their self-concept (Lee *et al.*, 2020). Social identity is defined as an individual's self-concept related to their membership in a social group and explains how a group-specific behavior is shaped by the knowledge, value, and emotional significance attributed to that membership (Tajfel, 1978; Lee *et al.*, 2020). In other words, social identity is expressed as an individual's sense of who they are, based on a constellation of social groups to which they belong. A group membership often gives an individual a sense of belonging to a social world. Individuals can divide their world into "us" and "them," based on their social group memberships. Thereby, social identity allows in-group members to distinguish themselves from out-group members (Funk *et al.*, 2016). A key point to the concept of team identification is the difference between the in-group and out-group membership status.

Team identification is a key concept for understanding the behaviors of sports consumers and thus has an important place in sports marketing research (Funk *et al.*, 2016). Among the main outcomes of team identification is team loyalty (Oliver, 1999). Team identification gives a sports consumer an in-group membership status and creates a sense of belonging to the other spectators and fans of the team (Funk *et al.*, 2016).

Team loyalty is important for the fans to feel a sense of belonging to their team. However, they need to identify with the team to be loyal to it. This identification, in turn, affects their consumption behaviors. From this aspect, it is possible to state that fans identify more with the team through the social identity they have developed, contributing to the team's income. This study differs from other studies in the literature in that team loyalty is used as a mediator. In the study, a model was developed to assess the effect of social identity on sports consumption behaviors through team loyalty. In this regard, the study is significant due to the examination of team loyalty as a mediator. In this context, it is aimed to examine the mediating role of team loyalty in the effect of fan social identity on sports consumption behavior intention.

In this context, based on the purpose of the research, answers to the following questions were sought:

(1) Does the social identity of the fans have an effect on their consumption behavior intentions?

(2) Does the social identity of the fans have an effect on team loyalty?

(3) Does the team loyalty of the fans have an effect on their consumption behavior intentions?

(4) Does the social identity of the fans have an effect on the consumption behavior intention through team loyalty?

Theoretical background

The social identity theory

The meaning and significance of social identity depend on the social conditions in which it is developed and maintained (Delia and James, 2018). Social identity is one's perception of themselves as identifying with a group, developing an emotional bond with the group, and having the same (or very similar) characteristics, interests, or connections with other members of the group (Underwood *et al.*, 2001). The social identity theory suggests that individuals have both personal and social identities. Personal identity includes characteristic attributes such as abilities and interests, while social identity consists of significant group categories based on demographic classifications (e.g. sex and race) or organizational memberships (e.g. religious, educational, and social organizations) (Fink *et al.*, 2009). The dimensions of social identity include in-group ties, centrality, and in-group affect.

The in-group ties dimension of social identity is related to the psychological bonds of the self with the group. Group members are functionalized to the extent to which they are a part of certain social groups (Cameron, 2004). In other words, social identity refers to the psychological commitment and belonging of the individual to the group of which they are a member (Ventura, 2012). With this in-group commitment and belonging, individuals can identify themselves with the group. The centrality dimension suggests that individuals can be in several social groups, which, however, may not all be equally important to the individual. The in-group affect reflects certain feelings, such as happiness, regret, and excitement derived from group membership. The emotional quality of group membership, in turn, affects self-esteem (Cameron, 2004).The social identity theory proposes that individuals need high self-esteem, which is partially met via memberships in social groups (Fink *et al.*, 2009; Tajfel and Turner, 1986).

Social identity and team identification

Team identification is consistent with the social identity theory, which allows individuals to achieve a greater sense of self than the perceived awareness, value, and emotional significance of belonging to a group (Delia, 2019). In other words, team identification is based on the social identity theory (Stroebel *et al.*, 2019). The social identity theory suggests that individuals have both personal and social identities (Fink *et al.*, 2009). Personal identity includes characteristic attributes such as abilities and interests, while social identity comprises significant group categories based on demographic classifications (e.g. sex and race) or organizational memberships (e.g. religious, educational, social organizations) (Turner, 1982; as cited in: Fink *et al.*, 2009). Team identification has attracted the attention of sports science researchers in recent years. Studies on team identification revealed cognitive, affective, and behavioral consequences (Boyle and Magnusson, 2007; Fink *et al.*, 2009). In this context, the following hypotheses were proposed within the scope of this research.

H1. Fan social identity has a direct positive effect on behavioral intentions toward sports consumption.

H2. Fan social identity has a direct positive effect on team loyalty.

Bruner *et al.* (2014) established that in-group affect had a positive impact on social behaviors among teammates. In their study, Bodet and Bernache-Assollant (2011) found that team identification had a moderating role in the effect of consumer satisfaction and the number of away games attended on different aspects of attitudinal loyalty. The study by Ma and Kaplanidou (2019) suggested that a high level of team identification could improve the positive impact of key service quality factors on behavioral intentions. Wu *et al.* (2012) established that team identification was a major determinant of fans' repurchase intentions. Studies showed that social identity and team identification had an impact on both team

loyalty and behavioral intentions toward sports consumption. Additionally, Stevens and Rosenberger (2012) revealed that identification has a positive effect on loyalty.

Studies have shown that fans with a high team identity are more likely to go to matches, pay more for tickets, buy sponsored products, and buy more team products than other fans (Fink *et al.*, 2009; Madrigal, 1995; Wakefield, 1995; Wann and Branscombe, 1993). However most importantly, fans with a high team identity are more likely to remain loyal to their team than other fans, even when their team performs poorly (Fink *et al.*, 2009; Wann and Branscombe, 1993).

Team loyalty

In the context of sports, loyalty is considered a commitment to a particular team, which is persistent, difficult to change, and affects cognitive thoughts and behaviors (Wu *et al.*, 2012). In other words, the loyalty of sports fans is persistent and resistant to change (Bodet and Bernache-Assollant, 2011; Chung *et al.*, 2019). Loyalty in sports, i.e. team loyalty, reflects the psychological commitment that includes consistent, persistent, and positive behaviors toward a team (Biscaia *et al.*, 2013; Funk and James, 2001). Loyal sports consumers are crucial to a team's success. They contribute to a sports team by purchasing the tickets of the team's games and ensuring its continuity, such as engaging in repurchasing behaviors (Bee and Havitz, 2010). The loyalty of sports consumers has been discussed under two dimensions: behavioral and attitudinal.

Behavioral loyalty refers to a sports fan's repurchase of the same product and service over time (Chung *et al.*, 2019; Wu *et al.*, 2012), in other words, the actual purchasing behavior toward the team (Biscaia *et al.*, 2013; Stevens and Rosenberger, 2012). Attitudinal loyalty, in turn, represents a fan's psychological commitment to the products and services that cause behavioral changes (Chung *et al.*, 2019; Wang *et al.*, 2011). Thus, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H3. Team loyalty has a direct positive effect on behavioral intentions toward sports consumption.

A study by Bee and Havitz (2010) obtained results showing that psychological commitment and resistance to change mediated the effect of fan attendance at professional sports events on behavioral loyalty. Biscaia *et al.* (2013) established that behavioral loyalty affected sponsorship awareness and differently impacted attitude and purchase intentions toward sponsors. In their study, Kim *et al.* (2021) explored the relationships between sports fan involvement, loyalty, and motivation, concluding that behavioral involvement had the strongest effect on spectator loyalty. In line with the results of these studies, it seems that team loyalty affects behavioral intentions. Mahony *et al.* (2000) stated that fans with a high level of loyalty are more likely to participate in competitions and purchase team products.

Attitudinal perspective, which is accepted as a psychological attachment process that leads to an increase in repurchase intention (Park and Kim, 2000; Wu *et al.*, 2012), has been defined as a key predictor of actual behavior in the literature (Ajzen and Driver, 1992; Wu *et al.*, 2012).

Behavioral intentions toward sports consumption

Understanding the behaviors of sports consumers is of increasing importance for sports marketing professionals. With a better understanding of consumer behaviors, marketing professionals can carry out their marketing activities more effectively, redesign sports products, act more price-sensitive, and have the opportunity to manufacture their products according to the specific needs of consumers (Trenberth and Garland, 2007). In this context, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H4. Team loyalty mediates the effect of fan social identity on behavioral intentions toward sports consumption

A loyal consumer is someone who consistently purchases a particular brand's product and service and conveys information about that brand by word of mouth. This type of loyalty is often developed through relationships built over time, making it difficult for consumers to change their preferences (Funk *et al.*, 2016; Jones *et al.*, 2000; Liu *et al.*, 2011). From this perspective, team loyalty is considered a positive outcome or outcome of team identification. This means that the more an individual identifies with a team, the more likely they are to be loyal (McDonald, 2010). Some studies support this situation:

The study by Yoshida *et al.* (2015) revealed that team identification, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions were not important antecedents of attendance frequency throughout the season. It was further found that long-term attendance at fan communities strengthened the continuity of such attendance. The study by Phua (2010) concluded that media consumption significantly affected both collective self-esteem and fan identity. According to the findings of the study by Ma and Kaplanidou (2019), the service quality factor had both indirect and direct effects on behavioral intentions, which were stronger in highly identified fans than in those with low levels of identification. Kwon *et al.* (2007) concluded that even fans highly identified with their team were sensitive to prices when deciding whether to buy their team's licensed products. The findings of these studies suggest that team identification has an impact on behavioral intentions toward sports consumption or behavioral intentions. Previous studies in the literature employed several factors as mediators between team identification and behavioral intentions. However, no study using team loyalty was identified.

Among the most distinctive features of sport are high levels of consumer loyalty and emotional involvement (Sutton *et al.*, 1997; Underwood *et al.*, 2001). Sports fans derive a sense of power and identity from their commitment to a team. Sports consumers (i.e. fans) generally see the product (i.e. the team) as a part of themselves and see team success as personal success and team failure as personal failure (Underwood *et al.*, 2001). From this point of view, using the concept of social identity together with team loyalty and using team loyalty as a mediating variable shows that our study is an original study.

Research method

The study aimed to establish football fans' levels of social identity, team loyalty, and behavioral intentions toward sports consumption and to determine the relationship between these variables using a structural equation model. Team loyalty and behavioral intentions toward sports consumption were common variables used in previous research. In the research model of our study, team loyalty was used as a mediator. The conceptual study model is presented in Figure 1. In addition, the study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Ankara University (No: 21/314, Date: 12/17/2019) for ethical considerations.

Participants

The study universe consisted of the Passolig holder fans of the Turkish Super League teams Ankaragücü and Gençlerbirliği. The distribution of the Passolig cards by clubs showed that Ankaragücü had 45,130 and Gençlerbirliği had 23.290, totaling to 68.420 Passolig holders for both teams in the 2020–2021 football season (passolig.com.tr). The study sample included 518 football fans of Ankaragücü and Gençlerbirliği. The sample size of the study was calculated using the G*power v3.1.9.4 software. Accordingly, the analysis revealed that an effect size of 0.05 and a sample size of 210 participants were enough to reach a statistical power of 0.95. The

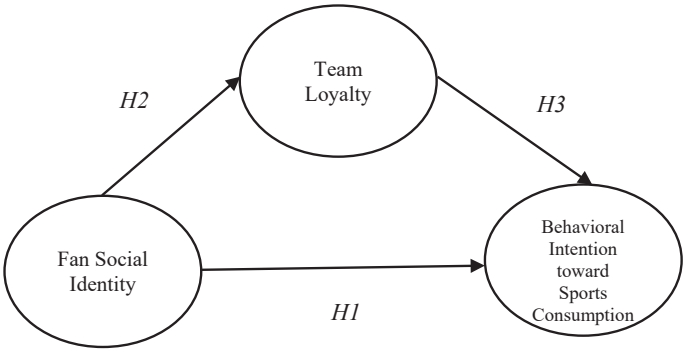

Figure 1.
Proposed
theoretical model

Source(s): Authors own creation

study included football fans selected by convenient sampling, a non-random sampling method. The data were collected online via Google Forms.

Table 1 includes information about the personal information of the participants. Of the 518 study participants, 18.1% (n = 94) were aged 16–21 years, 27.4% (n = 142) were aged 22–27 years, 22.6% (n = 116) were aged 34–39 years and 19.5% (n = 101) were aged over 40 years. The mean age of the study participants was 30.87 (±10.15) years. Concerning educational level, 2.5% (n = 13) were primary school graduates, 24.5% (n = 127) high school graduates and 73.0% (n = 378) university graduates, which formed the majority. The income of the participants, in turn, was ≤$260 in 25.5% ($n$ = 132), $261–$387 in

		f	%
Age	16–21 years	94	18.1
	22–27 years	142	27.4
	28–33 years	116	22.4
	34–39 years	65	12.5
	Over 40 years	101	19.5
Graduate	Primary school graduates	13	2.5
	High school graduates	127	24.5
	University graduates	378	73.00
Income	≤$260	132	25.5
	$261–$387	61	11.8
	$388–$516	98	18.9
	$517–$645	55	10.6
	≥$646	172	33.2
Membership in fan group	Yes	177	34.2
	No	341	65.8
Time to become a member of the fan group	0–5 years	417	80.5
	6–11 years	35	6.8
	12–17 years	27	5.2
	18–23 years	13	2.5
	Over 24 years	26	5.0
Team	Gençlerbirliği	227	43.8
	Ankaragücü	291	56.2
	Total	518	100

Table 1.
Personal
characteristics of the
participants

Source(s): Authors own creation

11.8% (n = 61), $388–$516 in 18.9% (n = 98), $517–$645 in 10.6% (n = 55) and ≥$646 in 33.2% ($n$ = 172) (Table 1).

Data collection tools

The research model of this study was tested using the data collected by the Team Loyalty Scale, Fan Social Identity Scale and Sports Consumption Behavior Scale.

The fan social identity scale

The Three-Factor Social Identity Scale developed by Cameron (2004) was adapted into Turkish by the researchers as the Fan Social Identity Scale (FSIS) within the scope of this study. The Three-Factor Social Identity Scale developed by Cameron (2004) was adapted into Turkish by Kural and Özbek (2021) as the "Supporter Social Identity Scale". The original scale consists of three dimensions and 12 items. However, since the factor load of the 6th item was low in the Turkish version of the measurement tool, it was excluded from the scale. The measurement tool was adapted into Turkish as three sub-dimensions and 11 items. The items were rated on a five-point Likert scale. Cronbach's Alpha values for the sub-dimensions of the scale were calculated as in-group ties 0.73, centrality 0.67, in group affect 0.65.

The team loyalty scale

The Team Loyalty Scale (TLS) was modified by Jung (2012) to measure the team loyalty levels of football fans' and adapted into Turkish by Polat *et al.* (2019). The TLS consists of two dimensions: behavioral loyalty and attitudinal loyalty. The instrument is rated on a 1–7 point Likert scale. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the scale dimensions was 0.82 for behavioral loyalty and 0.80 for attitudinal loyalty.

The sports consumption behavior scale

The Sports Consumption Behavior Scale (SCBS), which was developed by Kim *et al.* (2011) to measure the level of consumption intentions of sports consumers and adapted into Turkish by Kiremitçi *et al.* (2014), consists of three dimensions and nine items. The items were evaluated using a 1–5 point Likert-type rating scale. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the scale dimensions was 0.81 for attendance intention, 0.80 for media consumption intention, and 0.87 for licensed merchandise consumption intention.

Data analysis

The research model was tested by analyzing data using AMOS 23.0. A CFA was performed to reevaluate the psychometric properties of the scales with current data, and a structural equation model was used to test the hypothetical relationships between the variables. Second order CFA was used in the study. The Sobel test was used to examine whether the interaction effect of social identity on behavioral intention toward sports consumption was mediated by team loyalty. In addition, the goodness-of-fit indices x2/sd, SRMR, CFI, GFI, NFI, AGFI and RMSEA were examined for each model.

Common method bias

Most researchers agree that common method variance (that is, the variance attributable to the measurement method rather than the constructs represented by the measurements) is a potential problem in behavioral research. This may cause erroneous findings in the analysis of the model developed between theoretical constructs (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). To avoid such errors, the common method variance was checked.

One of the most common techniques used by researchers to address the issue of common method variance is Harman's single-factor (or one-factor) test (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). The present study used Harman's single-factor test and found that it explained 28.48% of the total variance. This finding suggests that a single factor determined for Harman's single-factor test explains less than 50% of the variance in the dependent variable (Von Felbert and Breuer, 2021; Harman, 1976).

Results

The data were normally distributed, and it was decided that they could be used for model estimation. In addition, Cronbach's Alpha values of the data are given in Table 2.

When the literature is examined, it is seen that Cronbach's Alpha values are accepted above 0.70, but values of 0.60 and above are also accepted (Griethuijsen *et al.*, 2014; Taber, 2018). Fornell and Larcker (1981) argue that convergent validity is adequate if the AVE of each corresponding construct is greater than the unexplained variance (i.e. AVE>0.5). In this study, AVE values of centrality and in-group affect structures are less than 0.50. However, what is commonly known about DFA is that these values should be greater than 0.45 to 0.50. Average Variance Extracted (AVE) is higher than 0.5 but we can accept 0.4. Because Fornell and Larcker said that if AVE is less than 0.5, but composite reliability is higher than 0.6, the convergent validity of the construct is still adequate (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). When Table 2 is examined, it has been determined that the CR value of the In-Group Affect sub-dimension of the Supporter Social Identity scale and the CR value of the Behavioral Loyalty sub-dimension of the Team Loyalty scale is close to the cutoff value (0.6), but lower than the determined value. It is also seen that the AVE value is less than 0.5. However, it is understood that these values are lower than the CR and AVE limit values, since the number of items for both sub-dimensions is 4 and 2 of the item factor loads are low. Accordingly, the opinions of the researchers and three different experts in the field (a total of five people including the researchers) were taken on the relevant items, and it was decided that these items were important for the measurement tool and that they should remain in the scale. In this context, it was deemed appropriate to continue the related analyzes with this structure.

Table 3 contains information about item structure and skewness and kurtosis values.

Model 1

In Figure 2, the effect of fans social identity on sports consumption behavior intention is examined. According to the results of SEM, it was determined that the social identity of the

Table 2.
Reliability coefficients and skewness and kurtosis values for the dimensions of the study scales

Scales and dimensions		n	Cronbach's alpha	X	SD	AVE	CR
Team loyalty	Behavioral Loyalty	518	0.60	5.52	1.13	0.29	0.61
	Attitudinal Loyalty	518	0.65	5.76	1.15	0.39	0.72
The fan social identity scale (FSIS)	In-Group Ties	518	0.73	3.91	0.85	0.42	0.72
	Centrality	518	0.67	3.85	0.92	0.41	0.67
	In-Group Affect	518	0.65	4.40	0.68	0.30	0.57
The sports consumption behavior scale (SCBS)	Attendance Intention	518	0.90	4.51	0.88	0.73	0.91
	Media Consumption Intention	518	0.80	4.15	1.09	0.94	0.98
	Licensed Merchandise	518	0.93	4.58	0.81	0.82	0.93

Source(s): Authors own creation

	Skewness	Kurtosis	*t*-value	Factor loading
Behavioral loyalty				
Item 1	1.13	−0.932	14.29**	0.53
Item 2			15.17**	0.41
Item 3			11.15**	0.70
Item 4			14.82**	0.47
Attitudinal loyalty				
Item 1	1.15	−1.27	11.37**	0.68
Item 2			14.98**	0.43
Item 3			11.45**	0.74
Item 4			11.94**	0.67
In-Group ties				
Item 1	0.850	−0.544	11.30**	0.74
Item 2			3.61**	0.92
Item 3			15.53**	0.42
Item 4			15.67**	0.37
Centrality				
Item 1	−0.496	−0.364	13.22**	0.45
Item 2			8.07**	0.65
Item 3			13.92**	0.41
In-Group affect				
Item 1	−1.20	1.17	8.95**	0.75
Item 2			15.45**	0.33
Item 3			15.75**	0.24
Item 4			10.85**	0.70
Attendance intention				
Item 1	−2.21	4.76	14.35**	0.79
Item 2			10.13**	0.91
Item 3			7.39**	0.94
Media consumption intention				
Item 1	−1.27	0.706	4.91**	0.64
Item 2			12.57**	0.83
Item 3			12.43**	0.85
Licensed merchandise				
Item 1	−2.33	5.46	11.16**	0.93
Item 2			4.42**	0.98
Item 3			14.65**	0.84

Source(s): Authors own creation

Table 3. Item structure and skewness kurtosis values

fans had a statistically significant positive effect on the sports consumption behavior intention ($\beta_{FSIS\text{-}SCBS} = 0.57$; $p < 0{,}05$).

Modification suggestions for the supporter social identity scale were taken into account, and goodness-of-fit indices for model 1 ($x^{2/sd} = 3.63$; SRMR = 0.03; CFI = 0.98; GFI = 0.98; NFI = 0.97; AGFI = 0.95; RMSEA = 0.07) was found to be at an acceptable level of fit (Hu and Bentler, 1999).

Second order confirmatory factor analysis

A second-order CFA (Figure 3) was conducted to reduce the underlying level of complexity and account for the limited sample size, as a larger number of variables is explained by a smaller number of latent constructs (Luo, 2011). Furthermore, the indices for H4 $_{(H4=FSIS \rightarrow TLS \rightarrow SCBS)}$ x2/sd = 4.07; SRMR = 0.04; CFI = 0.96; GFI = 0.96; NFI = 0.95; AGFI = 0.93; and RMSEA = 0.07) were found to indicate acceptable fit (Hu and Bentler, 1999).

The analyses revealed that the effect of fan social identity on team loyalty was statistically significant ($\beta = 1.47$; $p < 0.05$). It was further found that the effect of team loyalty on behavioral intention toward sports consumption was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.432$; $p < 0.05$). However, the effect of fan social identity on behavioral intention toward sports consumption was not statistically significant ($\beta = 0.152$; $p > 0.05$) (Figure 3).

As seen in Table 4, the social identity of the fans had an indirect effect on behavioral intention toward sports consumption. It was concluded that team loyalty fully mediated this indirect effect.

In order to test whether the mediation effect was statistically significant in the analyzes made, the Sobel test was applied in line with the recommendations of Baron and Kenny (1986). As a result of the Sobel test, statistical significance was determined.

In addition, the Sobel test was used to establish the significance of the mediating effect. Table 5 shows the results of the Sobel test. As is seen in Table 5, the mediation tests were confirmed by the Sobel test ($p < 0.05$). The analysis revealed that team loyalty fully mediated behavioral intention toward sports consumption through fan social identity.

The data in Table 6 show that the study hypotheses were affirmed.

Discussion

The present study examined the mediating role of team loyalty in the effect of fan social identity on behavioral intention toward sports consumption. First, a CFA was performed for

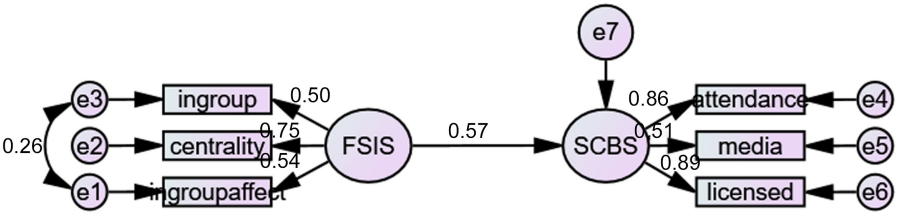

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Figure 2.
The relationship between fan social identity and sports consumption behavioral intention (Model 1)

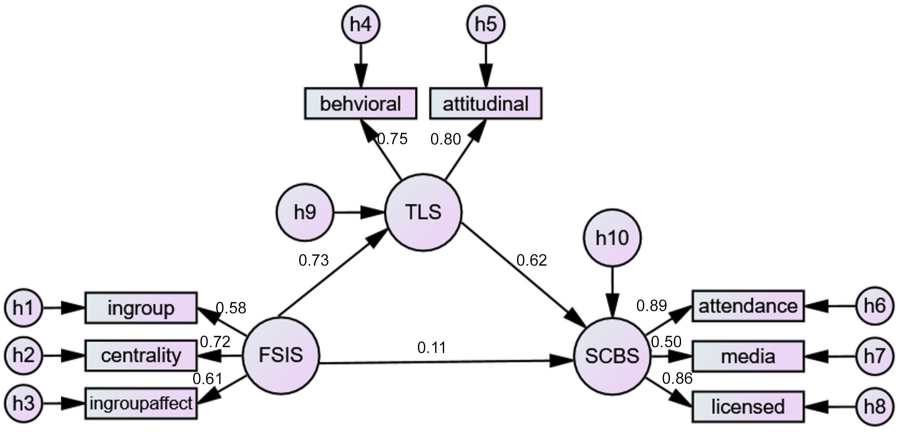

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Figure 3.
The mediation model for fan social identity–team loyalty–behavioral intention toward sports consumption (Model 2)

each scale by including the goodness-of-fit indices (x2/sd, SRMR, CFI, GFI, NFI, AGFI, and RMSEA). According to the CFA results, all of the goodness-of-fit indices for the study measurement tools were within acceptable limits. Then, the validity of the research model was assessed by including the goodness-of-fit indices. Accordingly, the study hypothesis H1 (FSIS → SCBS) was affirmed. Thus, it was confirmed that the social identity of the fans affected their behavioral intentions toward sports consumption. Social identity is a concept discussed in research on sports consumption behaviors. Team identification is also commonly examined in sports consumption studies in the literature.

The concept of team identification has become central to the sports management literature as a way to more accurately understand sports consumer behaviors (Heere and James, 2007). Team identification reflects the psychological bond between fans and sports teams, making sports teams a part of one's identity (Ma and Kaplanidou, 2019; Wann and Branscombe, 1993). From this perspective, team identification refers to the shared social identification of a group of fans with the supported sports team (Kwon *et al.*, 2007; Ma and Kaplanidou, 2019). Team identification is based on the social identity theory. Therefore, the present study discussed the social identity concept together with the concept of team identification. Accordingly, the study hypothesis H1 (FSIS → SCBS) was affirmed.

The higher a fan's level of identification, the greater their willingness to engage in consumption behaviors supporting the team (Fisher and Wakefield, 1998; Kim *et al.*, 2013). In other words, highly identified fans are more likely to consume products (attendance, media, product, etc.) regardless of the team performance (Kim *et al.*, 2013; Wann and Branscombe,

	Outcomes				
	TLS			SCBS	
Predictors	β	*Sh*	β		*Sh*
FSIS	1.47*	0.15	0.87*		0.11
R^2	0.53			0.33	
FSIS	–	–	0.15		0.12
TLS	–	–	0.43*		0.06
R^2	–			0.53	
Indirect effect	–			0.45*	

Source(s): Authors own creation

Table 4. The analysis results on the structural model

FSIS-TLS-SCBS	Sobel test		
	Test Statistics	Standard Error	*p*-value
	7.91	0.02	0.00

Source(s): Authors own creation

Table 5. The Sobel test results

	Hypotheses	Standardized β	Affirmation
Direct effect	H1 = FSIS → SCBS	0.57	Affirmed
	H2= FSIS →TLS	0.75	Affirmed
	H3 = TLS→ SCBS	0.71	Affirmed
Indirect effect	H4 = FSIS →TLS→ SCBS	0.11	Affirmed

Source(s): Authors own creation

Table 6. The structural model coefficients

1990). Behaviors of sports fans or spectators include attending games, watching the games on television, purchasing the licensed merchandise of the team, and following the team via media (Internet, radio, newspaper, etc.) (Matsuoka *et al.*, 2003). Team identification plays a great role in engaging in these behaviors. The study by Matsuoka *et al.* (2003) supports this view. The findings of their study revealed that team identification had a direct effect on spectator intention to attend future games. The authors further found that the spectators that identified with their team had a high level of intention to attend future games. Attending games and purchasing the team's licensed merchandise are often considered behaviors that help distinguish the fans of one team from the fans of other teams (Fisher and Wakefield, 1998; Sierra *et al.*, 2012; Shane-Nichols *et al.*, 2020) and make the fans feel socially identified with their team (Kwak and Kang, 2009; Shane-Nichols *et al.*, 2020). In addition to these studies, Silva and Veríssimo's (2020) study concluded that the identification of the fans with the sports team had a positive and direct effect on the intention to purchase sponsored products. Wear *et al.* (2018) established that team identification mediated brand associations and consumer behavioral intentions. The authors also concluded that team identification had a greater effect on media consumption and product consumption than on attendance intention. The study by Kwon and Armstrong (2002), in turn, concluded that the higher the level of identification of consumers with sports teams, the higher their likelihood of purchasing the team's products. The authors also reported that the level of identification affected the amount of money spent. Identification or social identity positively affects team loyalty and sports consumers' intention both to attend games and to purchase team products. When fans join a group, they want to strengthen their bonds to adapt to that group. This also contributes positively to loyalty and consumption intentions toward the team.

The study hypothesis H2 (FSIS → TLS) was affirmed. It was confirmed that fan social identity affected team loyalty. The findings of some studies revealed that the highly identified fans remained loyal to their team even if the performance of the supported team was poor (Fink *et al.*, 2009; Wann and Branscombe, 1993). In this respect, the findings of our study also support this statement. Furthermore, the study by Park *et al.* (2018) concluded that team identification had a positive effect on team loyalty. Stroebel *et al.* (2019) also established a positive impact of team identification on loyalty. Additionally, Karjaluoto *et al.* (2016) reported a positive effect of identification on loyalty. However, this study established that attitudinal loyalty had a stronger effect on identification than behavioral loyalty. In this respect, it is possible to conclude that team identification is affected by team loyalty. Due to the strong relationship between team identification and social identity, likely, team loyalty is also affected by social identity.

The study hypothesis H3 (TLS → SCBS) was affirmed. It was approved that team loyalty affected behavioral intention toward sports consumption. Fan loyalty studies have significant implications for all levels of the sports industry. As in the marketing of any product, it is important to meet the needs of consumers or fans as well as ensure their loyalty in the marketing of sports products (Da Silva and Las Casas, 2017; Kim *et al.*, 2020). Ensuring such loyalty and meeting the needs require examining the psychology of consumers and the impacts of behavioral and attitudinal loyalty (Kim *et al.*, 2020; Yoshida *et al.*, 2015). There is a consensus in the literature that consumer loyalty is a two-dimensional concept with attitudinal and behavioral domains (Bodet and Bernache-Assollant, 2011). Fan loyalty is among the leading factors in the economic success of teams (Oliver, 1999; Stroebel *et al.*, 2019). It is always beneficial to sports clubs to have a loyal fan or spectator base that will allow them to establish greater connections with individuals of the society as well as achieve organizational goals (Kim *et al.*, 2020; Yoshida *et al.*, 2015). Having loyal fans implies increased income for the team, as such fans will maintain their support for the team during times of limited success and interact with the team in a variety of environments (Gladden and Funk, 2001; Kunkel *et al.*, 2016). In brief, the loyalty of fans to their team means an increased income for the team. It is possible to state that this influences behavioral intentions toward

sports consumption. This view is also supported by Biscaia *et al.*'s (2013) study. The authors investigated the individual effects of behavioral and attitudinal loyalty on consumption intention. The findings showed that attitudinal loyalty positively affected the intention to purchase sponsor products, while the effect of behavioral loyalty was partial. Other studies, on the contrary, established that team loyalty had a positive impact on the intention to attend future games (Cho and Lee, 2019; Sumino and Harada, 2004). The review of the literature shows that team loyalty has been used as a mediator. The present study confirmed that team loyalty was a mediator in the effect of fan social identity behavioral intention toward sports consumption.

The last study hypothesis H4 (FSIS → TLS → SCBS) was affirmed. In their study, Wakefield and Sloan (1995) determined that team loyalty had a positive impact on game attendance. In a similar vein, Cho and Lee (2019) used the concept of loyalty as a mediator and demonstrated its positive impact on the intention to attend games. Likewise, Altın *et al.* (2020) employed team loyalty as a mediating variable. In the said study, the authors determined that the degree of team identification did not have an impact on team loyalty, while it positively and directly affected the intention to purchase. Concerning the mediation effect, the authors reported that team loyalty partially mediated the effect of fans' eFANgelism perceptions on their intentions to purchase.

Theoretical implications

The present study attempted to address the gaps in sports literature by conducting a study from the perspective of sports fans. The relationships between sports fans and sports teams are quite important in determining the future behaviors of sports consumers. We conducted our study based on the social identity theory that was introduced by Tajfel and Turner (1986). Besides, the present study contributed to the literature by highlighting the influence of team loyalty on social identity and behavioral intentions toward sports consumption. The findings of our study suggest that social identity positively affects sports consumption behaviors. The present study provides additional insight into the available literature on team identification. It demonstrated that team identification was associated with social identity and that social identity had an impact on sports consumption behaviors. Furthermore, considering that team identification is derived from the social identity theory, the findings of our study are in agreement with team identification studies in the literature. On the contrary, team loyalty appears to be an outcome of team identification (Oliver, 1999). It is possible to state that the use of team loyalty as a mediating variable in the present study would contribute to the studies on sports consumption behaviors.

Underwood *et al.* (2001) stated that the more the fans identify with the team, the more the value of the team will increase. Fans who feel more connected and identify with their team can directly affect the team. In summary, the more an individual sees himself as somehow connected to a team, the more the team's brand is worth to that person (Boyle and Magnusson, 2007). At this point, the importance of social identity becomes even more evident. The reason for this is that the fans act by feeling that they belong to a group. Fans make an effort to buy more of the club's products or to participate in all competitions of the team in order to gain an identity within their team's supporter groups. It is further likely that the positive impacts of team loyalty can contribute to an increase in the income of sports clubs.

Practical implications

The present study explains the factors that differ in consumption behaviors between some fans and others, providing benefits to sports club managers. By understanding how the extent of social identity affects sports consumption intention, sports club managers can

achieve a higher level of fan loyalty to their teams. A high level of team loyalty, in turn, was found to have a potentially positive impact on consumer behaviors. Fans can exhibit a variety of consumption behaviors. Some fans prefer watching the games in the stadium. Some fans, on the contrary, engage in consumption behaviors by purchasing licensed merchandise of the club. Kamath *et al.* (2021) pointed out that sports consumers could exhibit consumption behaviors by indirectly watching via television, mobile phone, or laptop or by reading about their favorite sports, teams, and players via magazines, newspapers, and social media, in addition to watching the games in the stadium. The in-group membership of the fans also plays a role in this situation. In other words, it is possible to state that the degree of social identification has an effect in some way.

The theory of social identity explains how individuals distinguish themselves based on the groups they belong to (Tajfel, 1978; Kamath *et al.*, 2021). According to Wang *et al.* (2011), fans perceive themselves as in-group members due to their perceived connection with a team, which, in turn, allows them to establish connections with other members of the same group, resulting in closeness or a sense of closeness among the group members. Such closeness or sense of closeness positively impacts fans toward their intention to purchase the products of the team and to attend the games to be in agreement with the members of the same group or to feel more included in that group. Sports team managers can work to increase this feeling of closeness more. Social media can be given as an example of these studies. Managers of clubs can work to interact more with fans, especially on social media. Social media is an area where all sports fans can come together in common, apart from stadiums. Some activities to be held in this area can increase the loyalty of the fans to their teams. Especially with some activities to be held on the Internet such as social media, teams can reach more consumers. Reaching more sports consumers will have a direct impact on the team.

Limitations/limitations and further research

The findings of the study should be interpreted considering the following limitations. First, the participants of the study were aged 18–40 and over years. Future studies can expand the age range. Second, the study included only male fans. Future studies can include female participants to contribute to the results on the sex variable. Furthermore, the concept of team loyalty has not been commonly used as a mediating variable in the literature, which is a limitation of the study. In addition, the study planned to collect the data at the stadium entrance before the game; however, it was not possible to reach the fans face-to-face due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and therefore, the data were collected online. Moreover, the FSIS used to collect data on the social identity of fans was adapted for the first time in this study. In this regard, this study is the first in the literature to adapt the scale to the social identity of fans, and this can be examined in future studies.

Conclusion

The analyses revealed that the social identity of the fans positively affected sports consumption behaviors. The review of the literature shows that sports consumption behaviors have been usually examined together with fan identification. However, as team identification is based on the theory of social identity, the present study associated this concept with fan identification. In this regard, it was ascertained from the literature that team identification positively affected behavioral intentions toward sports consumption. It was determined that team identification especially had a positive impact on the intention to attend games and that fans with greater identification with their team were more likely to attend their team's games. Besides, it was established that the social identity of fans positively affected team loyalty.

Social identity allows people to classify themselves and other groups as "in-group" and "out-group," respectively. From this perspective, the theory of social identity influences the behaviors of sports fans toward the fans of their team and the fans of the rival team. The social identity theory is commonly used in research on sports consumption behaviors and team loyalty. The theory of social identity discusses one's identification with the group they belong to and emotional bonds with the members of that group. Especially given the bond that sports fans establish with their teams, identification with their team and developing bonds with their team are in agreement with the social identity theory and the findings of our study. When the literature is reviewed, team loyalty appears to be an outcome of team identification. This statement also supports the findings of our study. Furthermore, the findings of other studies in the literature indicate that fans highly identified with their team; in other words, fans with a higher level of social identification would be more loyal to their teams. From this perspective, it was established that team loyalty positively affected behavioral intentions toward sports consumption.

Fans loyal to their teams attend games more frequently. Additionally, studies in the literature also support that team loyalty does not affect only the intention to attend games but also causes fans to purchase more team merchandize. Finally, our study, which examined the mediating role of team loyalty in the effect of fan social identity on sports consumption behaviors, found that team loyalty had an impact on the behavioral intention of sports consumption as a mediator. Although team loyalty was used in several studies together with behavioral intentions toward sports consumption or team identification, there is scarce research with team loyalty included as a mediating variable. In this sense, we can state that the present study is significant as it fills a literature gap.

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