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A Research On Soccer Teams' Brand Associations

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ABSTRACT

The identification of brand associations of consumers with respect to sports teams has a crucial role in decisions of sports managers who aim at enhancing the efficiency of their marketing endeavors. The objective of this research is to measure brand associations considering soccer teams and investigate the significance of brand associations attached to soccer teams. Seven-hundred and forty-nine soccer team supporters participated in this research. As a result of the research, it has been found that success, social interaction and brand marks are the most significant brand association dimensions for soccer teams.

KEYWORDS:brand associations, sports, soccer teams

INTRODUCTION

Brand associations, which fall into brand image concept, constitute one of the topics of brand management in marketing. Brand associations have a crucial role in forming brand image. Researchers have revealed that brand associations have a positive impact on consumers' selection of products/services, their perception, purchasing intentions, conducts, their willingness to pay more for brands, their likelihood to recommend brands to others and their response to brand extention (Agarwal and Rao, 1996; Coob-Walgren et al.1995; del Rio et al. 2001; Park and Srinavasan, 1994; Vazquez et al.2002; Yoo and Donthu, 2001). Brand image is the entirety of current brand associations or how brands are viewed by consumers (Aaker, 1996). Brand image can be defined as perceptions about a brand reflected by associations in consumers' memory in relation to a brand name. Thus, brand associations incorporate connections in consumers' memory with regards to brands and entail the significance of brands (Keller, 1993). Brand associations

could be anything specific to a brand in the minds of consumers (Aaker, 1991). Keller (1993) classified brand associations into three dimensions such as attributes, benefits and attitudes. Attributes relate to things that determine the definition of a specific brand such as what that brand is, what it possesses and contains with respect to its usage. Benefits refer to consumers' personal values attach to brand attributes and what they think brands can do for them or can be defined as the benefits offered by a specific brand. Brand attitudes are consumers' overall evaluations of a brand. Particularly, the favorability, strength and uniqueness of brand associations assume a vital role in determining differential response. If consumers regard a brand as similar to a product or service that is put forward firstly in the same product class, then they will not have a differential response to a brand set forth later. However, if a brand has salient attributes and unique associations, then consumers will have a differential response. The differentiation of these associations depends on marketing mix elements planned for the specific brand as well as the consumer assessments.

The establishment of brand awareness and positive brand image in consumers' mind (favorable, strong and unique associations) creates different types of consumer-based brand-equity depending on the marketing mix elements to be considered (Keller, 1993). Low and Lamb (2000) put forward that brand associations have differentiated among brands and product classes. Different brand associations for different products should be measured. The dimensionality of brand associations is affected by brand familiarity. Keller (1993) who conceptualized consumer-based brand equity as brand knowledge classified product attributes as product-related and non-product related attributes and categorized product benefits as functional, experiential and symbolic benefits. As a consequence, associations shaping brand image encompass product related, non-product related attributes, functional, symbolic and experiential benefits and brand attitudes. Brand associations may vary in accordance with favorability, strength and uniqueness of brands.

Brand Associations in Sports Teams

Having deemed the brand association classification of Keller (1993) as a model, Gladden and Funk (2002) developed Team Association Scale (TAS) upon their research on brand associations in sports teams. Their research was carried out by the participation of 392 supporters of American football, baseball, basketball and hockey teams of the North America. The sport teams supported by the participants are American football (48%), baseball (36, 7%), basketball (9, 3%), hockey (4, 9%) and other sports (1, 1%). TAS consists of three dimensions such as attributes (success, head coach, star player, management, stadium, logo design, product distribution and traditions), benefits (identification, nostalgia, regional honor, escape and acceptance of peer group) and attitudes (significance, knowledge and interaction-emotions) with 16 factors and 50 items (Gladden and Funk, 2002). Ross, James and Vargas (2006) suggested that Gladden and Funk (2002) conceptualized brand associations with respect to in sports teams based on supporters' reasons, motivations and needs to attend matches, however, these are not needed for brand associations for a sports team. According to Ross et al. (2006) specific brand associations for a specific sports team should be revealed rather than the reasons for attending a match or becoming a supporter. Moreover, Ross et al. (2006) claimed that

dimensions of TAS were determined by researchers and were not formed based on the free thinking of a group of participants, thus its validity was disputable. As a result, they advocated the opinion that brand associations should be determined and dimensioned by consumers as "brand associations are anything in relation to a brand in consumer's mind (Keller, 1993)". Ross et al. (2006) developed Team Brand Association Scale (TBAS) in order to reinforce their line of argument. Explanatory Factor Analysis was adopted by the participation of 367 undergraduate students in the development of TBAS. The sports teams of participants were as below: baseball (43,8%), american football (34,4%), basketball (16,1%), hockey (2,2%) and rugby and soccer et al. (3,6%). TBAS is comprised of 41 items and 11 dimensions. The dimensions are: brand marks, rivalry, food and drinks (in the stadium), social interaction, team history, commitment of supporters, organizational attributes, non-player personnel, stadium, team success and team play. Ross, Russel and Bang (2008) asserted that brand awareness and brand associations compose the concept of brand equity in sports teams.

Bauer, Sauer and Schmidt (2004) conducted the research which discussed brand association in sport teams for the first time. In the research of Gladden and Funk (2002) and Ross et al. (2006), brand associations considering American football, baseball, basketball and hockey teams were dwelled upon in line with sports culture of North America. The research of Bauer et al. (2004) proves to be very precious within the context of brand associations in soccer teams as it reflects European culture where soccer is considered more important than other sports. Their research was conducted with 1236 supporters of German soccer teams. Researchers evaluated brand associations on the basis of uniqueness, favorability and strength as offered by Keller (1993). As a result of the research, it was found that brand associations linked to soccer teams embodied 12 factors such as sportive success, star player, coach, management, logo, stadium, stadium ambiance (entertainment, food and drinks), regional significance (pride), fan identification, interest of friends and family, nostalgia and escape. Gladden and Funk (2002) and Bauer et al. (2004) took the conceptual study of Keller (1993) in brand associations as the basis in order to measure brand associations attached to sports teams. Gladden and Funk (2002) split brand associations into attributes, benefits and attitudes. As for Bauer et al. (2004) brand associations bifurcated into attributes and benefits. Bauer et al. (2004) argued that the dimension of attitudes should not be included in brand associations as it relates to feelings and opinions such as degree of satisfaction with a brand, feeling of trust in a brand etc.

In this study, the research and postulations of Keller (1993), Gladden and Funk (2002), Bauer et al. (2004) and Ross et al. (2006) have been scrutinized and brand associations in soccer teams are designed as attributes and benefits. Success, coach, star player, management, stadium, brand marks, club history, rivalry, team play, fans, fan identification, nostalgia, escape, peer group acceptance, social interaction are hailed as sub dimensions of brand associations in soccer teams. Table 1 shows brand association dimensions of previous studies and dimensions of brand associations scale employed in this study.

Table 1. Dimensions of Brand Associations in Sports Teams.

Brand associations	Gladden and Funk (2002) Attributes, Benefits, Attitudes	Bauer et al. (2004) Attributes Benefits	Ross et al. (2006, 2008) Brand associations (unidimensional)	Current research Attributes Benefits
Attributes	Success	Athlethic success	Team success	Success
	Head coach	Coach	Nonplayer personnel	Coach
	Star player(s)	Star player(s)	-	Star player(s)
	Management	Management		Management
	Venue	Stadium	Stadium community	Stadium
	Logo design	Logo	Brand marks	Brand marks
	Product delivery	Stadium atmosphere	Concessions	-
	Tradition	-	Team history	Club history
		Regional importance	-	-
			Organizational attributes	-
			Rivalry	Rivalry *
			Team play	Team play *
			Commitment	Fans *
Benefits	Fan identification	Fan identification	-	Fan identification
	Nostalgia	Nostalgia	-	Nostalgia *
	Pride in place	-	-	-
	Escape	Escape	-	Escape
	Peer group acceptance	Interest of family and friends	-	Peer group acceptance *
			Social interaction	Social interaction
Attitudes	Knowledge	-	-	-
	Importance	-	-	-
	Affective reactions	-	-	-

* Dimensions derived from the scale as a result of validity and reliability analyses.

As shown in Table 1, the research in the literature pertaining to brand associations is composed of similar and different brand associations. In line with the argument of Ross et al. (2006), this study deems it necessary to include sub dimensions of rivalry, commitment of fans to team and socialization etc. in brand associations attached to sports teams. Since this research is inclusive of supporters who are not regular match-goers or stadium-attendees, product distribution dimension (food and drinks) is not incorporated into brand associations. Sports clubs such as Barcelona, Milan, Bayern Munich, Borussia Dortmund, Ajax and Manchester United have supporters from not only the regions where originated from but also all around their country and the world. Beşiktaş, Fenerbahçe and Galatasaray whose brand associations are explored in this research have supporters from all around Turkey. The dimension of regional pride (people in the neighborhood of a specific team taking pride in that team) is ruled out from brand associations as soccer teams have both nation-wide and international supporters. As already stated by Bauer et al. (2004) the dimension of attitudes pertains more to "emotions and opinions on a brand such as satisfaction with a brand, trust in a brand etc. rather than brand associations" (Yoo and Donthu, 2001) thus this dimension is not investigated in the scope of brand associations.

METHOD

Seven-hundred and forty-nine fans of three major soccer teams of Turkey participated in this research. The number of male participants is five-hundred and forty-six whereas the number of female participants is 203. The average age of participants corresponds to 21, 80 ± 2, 37. Three-hundred and two participants (40%) support Galatasaray, two-hundred and seventy-eight participants support Fenerbahçe (37%) and the remaining one-hundred and sixty-nine (23%) support Beşiktaş. With the aim of ensuring content and face validity of the measurement tool, a pool of items was set by selecting some items from TAS (Gladden and Funk, 2002) and TBAS (Ross, Russel and Bang, 2006) upon receiving advice from three academicians and researchers specialized in sports management and marketing. These specialists also contributed to the pool of items with their own additions. A Turkish-English-Turkish semantic equivalence study was performed as outlined by Brislin (1990), as well. The scale is the Likert scale of 5. Internal consistency analysis and confirmatory factor analysis were conducted so as to analyze data derived from the scale.

RESULTS

Reliability and Validity of the Scale

Confirmatory factor analysis of the scale culminated in the following results: RMSEA value .032, X^2 = 809.12 (p= 0.000), X^2 / sd (809.12 / 433) = 1.86, CFI= 0.97, GFI= 0.95, AGFI= 0.93, NFI= 0.95, NNFI= 0.97 RMR=0.034. The measurement model of the study was found to have good fit values (Schermelleh-Engel et al. 2003). Construct reliability values and and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) were utilized for the reliability analysis of the scale. As for the validity analysis, convergent validity and discriminant validity methods were adopted. Fornell and Larcker (1981) championed the usage of construct reliability and AVE to achieve reliability measurements in their structural equation modelling studies. Despite the measurement of internal consistency with Cronbach α co-efficient, the ratio of variance extracted inclusive of measurement errors of variables cannot be detected. AVE and reliability measurements can be performed in structural equation modellings. Construct reliability of the scale, AVE, factor load, standard error, t and R^2 values are demonstrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Results of Reliability and Validity Analyses

Factors and items	CR*	AVE**	Factor loadings	SEM***	t	R²
Success	0.76	0.52				
I1			0.74	0.03	20.47	0.55
I2			0.78	0.03	23.18	0.61
I3			0.63	0.03	17.29	0.39
Coach	0.86	0.62				
I4			0.84	0.02	28.89	0.70
I5			0.55	0.03	16.70	0.30
I6			0.87	0.02	30.58	0.76
I7			0.85	0.02	29.75	0.73
Star player	0.82	0.61				
I8			0.85	0.03	28.73	0.72
I9			0.69	0.03	21.65	0.48
I10			0.79	0.03	25.47	0.62
Management	0.80	0.51				
I11			0.75	0.03	22.84	0.56
I12			0.81	0.03	25.27	0.66
I13			0.67	0.03	20.89	0.45
I14			0.60	0.03	17.76	0.36
Club history	0.77	0.54				
I15			0.85	0.03	26.28	0.73
I16			0.77	0.03	23.31	0.59
I17			0.55	0.03	14.17	0.30
Stadium	0.87	0.70				
I18			0.87	0.02	30.19	0.76
I19			0.90	0.02	31.97	0.82
I20			0.73	0.03	23.96	0.54
Brand marks	0.75	0.51				
I21			0.75	0.03	22.03	0.57
I22			0.74	0.03	21.59	0.55
I23			0.65	0.03	19.69	0.43
Escape	0.89	0.73				
I24			0.79	0.03	24.72	0.62
I25			0.88	0.02	30.56	0.78
I26			0.89	0.02	30.07	0.78
Fan identification	0.85	0.65				
I27			0.87	0.03	27.94	0.76
I28			0.76	0.03	24.54	0.58
I29			0.78	0.03	23.97	0.62
Social interaction	0.88	0.65				
I30			0.86	0.03	25.85	0.72
I31			0.86	0.03	27.22	0.74
I32			0.76	0.02	23.70	0.58
I33			0.73	0.02	23.01	0.54

* Construct reliability, ** Average Variance Extracted, *** Standard Error of Mean.

Fornell and Larcker (1981) reported that the calculated AVE value should be greater than 0.50. Hair et al. (1998) and Hatcher (1994) proposed that construct reliability values should exceed 0.70 and AVE values should be more than 0.50. As shown in Table 2, all construct reliability values of the factors in the scale are greater than 0.70 and vary between 0.75 and 0.89. Besides, all AVE values are more than 0.50 and fluctuate between 0.51 and 0.73.

Convergent Validity
The fact that the relevant factor load of each scale item has a statistically meaningful t value and that each of these factors loads is greater than the square of its own standard

error attest to the achievement of convergent validity (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). Hair et al. (1998) accentuated that factor loads of scale items should be more than 0.50 and above. As disclosed by Table 2, the factor loads of scale items oscillate between 0.55 and 0.92. Moreover, the factor load of each is bigger than the square of its own standard error. T values of factor loads belonging to scale items are statistically meaningful and t values range between 14.17 and 31.97. All of these findings are manifestations of attaining convergent validity.

Discriminant Validity

Anderson and Gerbing (1988) highlighted that the discriminant validity of factors diminishes as inter factorial relationship moves closer to 1 or -1. As for Kline (1998), he put forward that a correlation coefficient of 0.85 and above would not make discriminant validity possible. According to the realization of discriminant validity for Fornell and Larcker (1981), the AVE value of each factor should outnumber the square of the correlation coefficient between that factor and other factors. If this condition cannot be fulfilled, it means that the construct relevant for that factor is explained through a correlation with another factor, which implies that the discriminant validity is low. Table 3 enlists the correlation co-efficient of brand association factors.

**Table 3. Results of Interfactorial Correlation Analysis**

Factors	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1.Success									
2.Coach	0.19								
3.Star player	0.49	0.29							
4. Management	0.24	0.45	0.46						
5. Clup history	0.39	0.37	0.41	0.33					
6. Stadium	0.16	0.21	0.22	0.17	0.04				
7. Brand marks	0.46	0.13	0.36	0.20	0.42	0.38			
8. Escape	0.37	0.11	0.33	0.17	0.26	0.26	0.37		
9. Fan identification	0.55	0.13	0.36	0.21	0.36	0.29	0.51	0.66	
10.Social interaction	0.29	0.13	0.26	0.20	0.15	0.26	0.23	0.59	0.63

It is apparent in Table 3 that inter factorial correlation co-efficient are less than 0.85. The AVE value of each factor (as in Table 2) is higher than the square of correlation coefficient with other factors. These prove the fulfillment of discriminant validity. As a result of the validity and reliability analyses conducted, it was found that brand associations attached to soccer teams encompass 10 sub dimensions (success, coach, star player, management, club history, stadium, brand marks, escape, fan identification, and social interaction) and 33 items.

Second Order Confirmatory Factor Analyses

In order to determine the importance of brand associations, second order confirmatory factor analyses was implemented. The fitting of model was tested as two dimensions

(attributes, benefits) and ten subdimensions (success, coach, star player, management, club history, stadium, brand marks, escape, fan identification and social interaction).
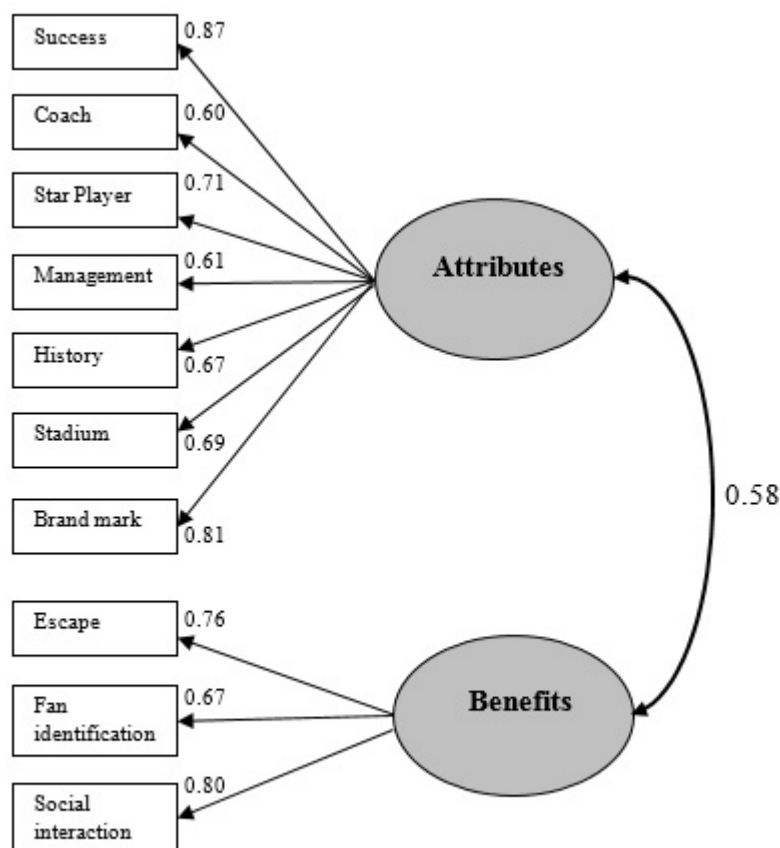
Figure 1: Results of Second Order Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Figure 1: Results of Second Order Confirmatory Factor Analysis
The following results were obtained from the secondary level confirmatory factor analysis of the scale: RMSEA value 0.026, X^2= 709.03 (p= 0.000), X^2 / sd (709.03 / 446) = 1.58, CFI= 0.98, GFI= 0.95, AGFI= 0.94, NFI= 0.95, NNFI= 0.98, RMR=0.032. Furthermore, the measurement model was found to have good fit values. It is conspicuous in Table 2 that the highest factor load pertaining to attributes dimension belongs to success sub dimension (γ= 0.87, t= 20.87, R^2= 0.76). The second highest factor load following success is brand mark sub dimension (γ= 0.81, t= 17.31, R^2= 0.66). Star player sub dimension deserves the third rank with a factor load of γ= 0.71 (t= 16.51, R^2= 0.51). The factor loads of other dimensions are as follows: Stadium γ= 0.69 (t= 16.29, R^2 = 0.48), club history= 0.67 (t= 14.22, R^2 = 0.45), management γ= 0.61 (t= 11.08, = R^2 0.37) and coach γ= 0.60 (t= 10.31, R^2= 0.36).

The above findings single out the dimension of success as the most important determiner among other attributes. Other prominent determiners following success dimension are brand marks and star player. The highest factor load in the dimension of benefits is occupied by social interaction (γ= 0.80, t= 20.19, R^2= 0.64).The second ranking factor load is owned by escape (γ= 0.76, t= 19.99, R^2= 0.58). The factor load of fan identification is γ= 0.67 (t= 15.63, R^2= 0.45). Departing from these data, the benefits yielded by soccer teams for supporters can be ranked as social interaction, escape and fan identification respectively.

DISCUSSION

Brand associations in the sampling of Turkish soccer teams were measured in this research. The scale consisting of 10 sub dimensions and 33 items is ascertained to be a reliable and valid one so as to measure brand associations attached to soccer teams. The most significant dimensions in attributes concerning brand associations are success ($R^2= 0.76$), brand marks ($R^2=0.66$) and star player ($R^2=0.51$). Thus, it can be deduced that the supporters attach utmost importance to the success of their soccer teams. Gladden et al. (1998) assume that success is probably the most important factor in the creation of brand associations. Branvold et al. (1997) suggest that success paves the way for positive outcomes in conjunction with the rise in ticket sales. Rivalry is intrinsic to sports and the basic goal of soccer teams is to become successful on the field. Successful soccer teams both satisfy their own supporters and attain new supporters. Therefore, it is very important for soccer teams to be successful. As offered by Aaker (1991), brand marks play a significant role in creation and differentiation of associations. Brand marks emerge as crucial among attributes, which also indicate that symbols, emblems and colors of teams are easily embraced and recalled associations. It can also be conceived that star players which fall into attributes dimension have a positive contribution to the success of sports teams, their visibility in the media, support and attention of supporters. Hence, star players appear to be a salient determiner in associations related to teams. The least important determiners in the dimension of attributes are management ($R^2=0.37$) and coach ($R^2=0.36$). In the light of this information, it can be interpreted that supporters' positive perceptions with regard to management and coaches are not at a remarkable level, which may be due to the fact that managerial activities are not deemed as sufficient by supporters and coaches could not reach the expected level of success in team management. The top ranking benefits of brands associations are social interaction ($R^2=0.64$), escape ($R^2=0.58$) and fan identification ($R^2=0.45$) respectively. Such a ranking underscores the fact that interacting, communicating with other supporters and sharing feelings while supporting their soccer teams are deemed more important compared to benefits such as escape and forming fan identification. This research also proves that fans of soccer teams which make up the subject matter of the research give more importance to benefits like the success of their team, the symbol, emblem and colors of their team, star players of their team, meeting and interacting with other people.

APPLICATIONS IN SPORT

Sports managers' enhancing marketing-oriented endeavors which emphasize the colors and the symbol of their team (brand extension, new product development), developing new strategies to own star players and form a successful team could be instrumental in boosting current fans' support and attaining new supporters. The scale, reformed in this study, so as to measure brand associations attached to soccer teams could be of great avail to sports marketers of soccer clubs in terms of their strategic brand management.

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