

Factors Influencing Fan Loyalty in Football Clubs

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Abstract:

The football industry has tremendous commercial value, and fan loyalty is critical to a club's sustained revenue and brand value. This study focuses on the factors influencing football club fan loyalty and adopts a systematic review of Chinese and English academic literature from 2012 to 2025, analyzing both theoretical models and empirical results. The study summarizes the main mechanisms of fan loyalty formation, including classic frameworks such as the investment–satisfaction–attachment three-element model, the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM), and the involvement–attitudinal loyalty–behavioral loyalty path. It also synthesizes four broad categories of external factors influencing fan loyalty—club brand image, spectator experience, club characteristics, and fan personal factors—and the patterns of their effects. The findings indicate that fan loyalty is shaped by a multitude of factors, and emerging factors such as local cultural context and digital technology play an increasingly prominent role in fostering loyalty. This study enriches theoretical understanding in the field of fan loyalty and provides practical insights for clubs to develop fan engagement strategies to enhance fan loyalty.

Keywords: Fan loyalty; influencing factors; brand image; spectator experience; fan identification.

1. Introduction

As one of the world's most commercially vibrant sports, the European football market achieved total revenues of approximately €38 billion in the 2023–2024 season, of which top clubs' average match-day revenue was around €103 million, accounting for 18% of total revenue [1]. A stable and loyal fan base not only maintains the stadium atmosphere, but also continuously amplifies the club's cash flows and brand premium through repeat ticket purchases, mer-

chandise consumption and word-of-mouth promotion [2]. Existing empirical research also confirms this effect: highly identified fans perceive their team's victories as their own successes, and thus invest emotionally and behaviorally over the long term, significantly boosting loyalty [2]. In the fiercely competitive professional sports environment, fan loyalty has become a key asset for clubs to secure long-term support and commercial success, the importance of which is self-evident.

Given the dual value of football club fan loyalty for

athletic performance and commercial outcomes, this study focuses on exploring the factors that influence football club fan loyalty. To this end, we systematically review empirical research on fan loyalty from the past decade, both domestic and international, and propose a future research agenda based on a comprehensive analysis of relevant theoretical models and empirical evidence. The focus of this work is to review the current state of research in the field of football club fan loyalty and to fill existing research gaps. Specifically, this study first summarizes the main mechanisms of fan loyalty formation, contrasting classic theoretical frameworks such as the investment–satisfaction–attachment three-element model, the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM), and the involvement–loyalty path [3–6]; next, it collates external dimensions of influence such as club brand image, match experience, club characteristics, and fan personal factors, distilling the key findings of existing literature and the interrelationships among these factors [7–10]; finally, on the basis of the above review, three main directions for future research are proposed, including model integration, local cultural adaptation, and the impact of digital technology, providing ideas for researchers to further conduct theoretical and empirical work, and providing systematic references for club fan engagement practices.

2. Literature Review

In recent years, empirical research on football fan loyalty has been increasing. Some scholars have examined the impact of club brand image on fan loyalty from perspectives such as brand equity and service experience—for example, Özlü et al. found that brand associations and perceived quality can significantly enhance football fan loyalty [8]; there are also studies focusing on the relationship between team performance and fan loyalty, such as Zhao et al., who based on a survey of fans of China's Changchun Yatai club confirmed that a team's overall performance enhances fans' emotional satisfaction, thereby increasing their attachment and loyalty [10]. These studies have enriched the understanding of individual influencing factors. However, systematic review literature remains very limited. As of 2025, only two review studies related to fan loyalty were found: one is a mapping review covering 195 sports brand loyalty studies [9]; the other focuses on the influence of fan identification on team loyalty in a systematic review [11]. The comparison shows that a comprehensive review focusing on “football club fan loyalty” still has significant gaps in areas such as comparison of different theoretical models, consideration of local cultural context, and the role of digital technology. To fill this gap, this study, by integrating relevant literature from the past decade, systematically explores the factors influencing football club fan loyalty and their mechanisms

of action, thereby providing a comprehensive theoretical review and practical implications for this field.

3. Fan Loyalty Formation Mechanisms

The formation of fan loyalty can be viewed as a continuous process of parallel psychological and behavioral development. Researchers have proposed multiple theoretical models to explain the evolutionary path of fan loyalty. Among these, the most classic is the three-element model. This model posits that fan loyalty is driven by three core elements: level of investment, satisfaction, and emotional attachment. Zhang et al. qualitative research further indicates that Chinese young fans' loyalty consists of investment, satisfaction, and a sense of belonging, showing a staged evolution from emergence to peak to decline in the loyalty development process [6].

The Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) was proposed by Funk and James, and views fan loyalty as a four-stage evolutionary process from awareness to loyalty [4]. This model posits that the psychological connection between fans and a club progresses through four stages: “awareness → attraction → attachment → loyalty,” with the loyalty stage corresponding to a high level of loyal attitude and sustained loyal behavior. PCM emphasizes that as fan engagement and emotional investment deepen, an internalized steadfast loyalty ultimately forms. PCM provides an illustrative pathway of fan development: for example, a fan might initially follow a team out of curiosity (awareness stage), and then become interested due to the team's playing style or star players (attraction stage), and through many exciting games and positive interactions gradually build an emotional bond (attachment stage), finally internalizing team support as part of their self-identity, remaining committed even when the team faces downturns (loyalty stage). This process vividly explains how, as involvement and emotion deepen, a fan grows from an ordinary spectator to a die-hard supporter.

Fan Involvement Theory has also been widely used to explain the development mechanism of fan loyalty. Domestic empirical research has found that fan involvement level has a significant positive effect on behavioral loyalty, and that attitudinal loyalty plays a partial mediating role between involvement and behavioral loyalty. For example, Jia Wenshuai et al., using data from Chinese Super League (CSL) fans, constructed a model and verified that increasing fans' level of involvement enhances their attitudinal loyalty to the team, and in turn promotes loyal behaviors, with attitudinal loyalty serving as a partial mediator in this process [6]. In addition, that study also found that the level of team identification moderates the effect of involvement on loyalty, where involvement's effect on behavioral loyalty is more pronounced when identification is low. This indicates the important role of

social identity theory in fan loyalty: highly identified fans more easily internalize their affiliation with the team, thus forming a more stable loyal relationship. For clubs, this finding means that by increasing fans' level of involvement with the team (for example, encouraging fans to participate in team events, follow team news, etc.), clubs can first enhance fans' positive attitudes toward the team, and further drive an increase in loyal behaviors, validating from a practical perspective the mechanism revealed by the Involvement–Attitudinal Loyalty–Behavioral Loyalty (IAL-BL) path [6].

The team identification (social identity) mechanism runs through the entire formation of fan loyalty. Wann and Branscombe and others proposed that fans regard the team as an extension of their self-concept, and this deep level of identification is the cornerstone for building a stable and lasting loyal relationship [5]. Highly identified fans often closely associate the team's victories and defeats with themselves, and this strong psychological bond not only directly drives the formation of loyalty, but also moderates the effects of other factors on loyalty. For example, some die-hard fans remain steadfast even when the team is performing poorly, precisely because strong team identification makes them see supporting the team as an important part of their identity, thus they remain loyal beyond considerations of practical gains or losses. This fully reflects the crucial role of social identification in maintaining long-term fan loyalty.

4. Factors Influencing Fan Loyalty

A large body of research shows that fan loyalty is influenced by a combination of multidimensional factors. These influencing factors can be broadly categorized into four major external dimensions: club brand image factors, spectator experience factors, club characteristic factors, and fan personal factors. These various factors intertwine and work together in cultivating and maintaining fan loyalty.

A club's brand image (including brand associations, perceived quality, etc.) is an important element in shaping the cognitive and emotional foundation of fans, and it has a significant positive effect on establishing and enhancing fan loyalty. For example, a club's unique cultural traditions, crest and colors carry emotional value that can strengthen fans' sense of belonging and loyalty to the team [7,8]. A strong brand image not only helps attract new supporters, but also leads existing fans to maintain a long-term emotional attachment to the team, so that they remain loyal even when the team's performance fluctuates.

Fans' subjective experience of watching matches, whether in-person or online, is also key to influencing loyalty. High-quality game viewing experiences and service qual-

ity can increase fan satisfaction, and in turn strengthen their willingness to watch again and support the team. The review by Carrillo-Barbosa et al. pointed out that fan satisfaction, personalized services and digital interactive strategies are all important drivers for cultivating loyalty [9]. For example, on match days, a club providing a unique in-stadium atmosphere and convenient services (such as seating guidance, food and beverage provision, etc.) can effectively increase fans' satisfaction with their experience; and providing digital experiences like match interactions and exclusive content via mobile apps and social media can also bring fans closer to the team, strengthening their sense of belonging and loyalty. Industry reports by Deloitte and others have also emphasized the importance of each aspect of the match experience, finding that well-designed personalized experiences and immersive digital interactions help increase fans' level of engagement and willingness to return.

A club's own characteristics and performance likewise impact fan loyalty. On one hand, the team's on-field performance is an obvious influencing factor; research generally finds that a team's performance on the field is positively correlated with fan loyalty: when the team's performance is excellent, fans more easily feel pride and an increase in loyalty, while consecutive failures can dampen some fans' enthusiasm. The empirical study by Zhao et al. shows that improving the team's overall competitive quality can enhance fans' emotional satisfaction, and in turn increase their attachment to and loyalty toward the team [10]. On the other hand, a team's historical heritage, regional culture, and social image—the soft power accumulated over time—cannot be ignored. These factors, by shaping the emotional bond between fans and the team, subtly influence the cultivation of loyalty. The study by Kim et al. pointed out that a club's active practice of social responsibility and creation of shared value can enhance fans' sense of trust in the team, thus significantly increasing their loyalty [12]. This indicates that besides on-field performance, a club's actions on the sociocultural level (such as community charity events, preserving historical traditions, etc.) can also indirectly affect fan loyalty. Teams with a long history and strong regional culture often cultivate a cross-generational base of loyal fans, and these fans, based on emotional identification with the team, remain supportive even during the team's down times, forming a more stable loyal relationship.

Fans' individual characteristics and behavioral participation are also important factors in determining loyalty. A series of studies have explored the influence of personal factors from the fans' psychological and community perspective. For example, fans' level of involvement with the club, strength of team identification, motivations for watching, and social needs are all closely related to loyalty. Highly identified and emotionally invested fans

often regard the team's fortunes as part of their personal achievements, and thus exhibit stronger loyalty [2]. Meanwhile, the sense of community belonging fans gain by participating in official club fan organizations, unofficial fan community activities and social media interactions also enhances their attachment and commitment to the team. Research emphasizes that high levels of team identification and emotional investment are among the most core predictors of fan loyalty. Furthermore, active participation in online and offline fan communities and social media interactions has also been shown to help expand the fan base and increase loyalty. For example, the study by Mohammadkazemi and Falahat found that a club's effective use of social media to communicate with fans can significantly promote the expansion of the fan base and the establishment of loyal relationships [13]. Thus, it can be seen that fans' psychological investment and community participation at the individual level play an intrinsic driving role in the formation and maintenance of loyalty.

5. Discussion

Synthesizing the above analysis, it can be seen that the formation of fan loyalty is dynamic and multidimensional in nature. Fan loyalty is not achieved overnight, but is a continuous evolution of a complex psychological process alongside behavioral expression. Multiple theoretical models together reveal the developmental pathways and mechanisms of fan loyalty. Among them, the investment–satisfaction–attachment three-element model emphasizes the core driving role of fans' cognitive involvement, emotional satisfaction and sense of belonging, suggesting that the development of loyalty may go through stages of emergence, peak and decline. The Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) clearly outlines a four-stage progressive process of the fan's psychological connection from awareness and attraction to attachment and finally internalization as loyalty, emphasizing the critical significance of fan engagement and emotional investment in ultimately forming firm loyalty. The involvement–attitudinal loyalty–behavioral loyalty path reveals the internal mechanism by which the level of fan involvement positively influences behavioral loyalty by enhancing attitudinal loyalty. It should be noted that these models each have their own emphasis when describing loyalty evolution, and how to integrate the perspectives of different models to form a more unified understanding of fan loyalty is a theoretical issue worthy of in-depth exploration. The social identification mechanism running through all the above models is recognized as the core driving force of fan loyalty: fans' identification of the team as an extension of themselves is the cornerstone for establishing a stable and lasting loyal relationship, as it not only directly contributes to loyalty but also moderates the effects of other factors such as

involvement on loyalty. This also explains why fans who strongly identify with a team are often able to remain loyal even during the team's low periods, because their identification with the team makes their loyalty transcend ordinary utilitarian considerations.

This study also indicates that the factors influencing fan loyalty are multifaceted and intertwined. A club's brand image provides the cognitive and emotional foundation for fans; a strong brand image can significantly enhance fans' trust in and loyalty to the team. Spectator experience factors are important drivers of immediate satisfaction and repeat patronage among fans—exciting matches, good service and interactive digital experiences all increase fan satisfaction and strengthen their sense of belonging. In terms of club characteristics, the team's competitive performance is undoubtedly the most direct influencing factor, but intangible assets such as the team's cultural heritage and community engagement, accumulated over time, likewise help cultivate deeper loyal relationships. Fans' individual level of involvement, identification and community participation determine the depth of loyalty from an internal perspective; highly involved and strongly identified fans can usually remain loyal even when the team experiences ups and downs. Therefore, only by comprehensively considering the interaction of multiple factors can one fully understand the mechanism of fan loyalty formation.

6. Conclusion

Research conclusions: Through a systematic review of relevant literature, this study comprehensively elucidates the formation mechanisms and influencing factors of football club fan loyalty. The results indicate that the formation of fan loyalty is a dynamic process of gradual accumulation from cognitive involvement and emotional satisfaction to emotional attachment; classic theories such as the investment–satisfaction–attachment model, the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) and the involvement–loyalty path collectively portray different aspects of loyalty evolution; at the same time, fan loyalty is influenced by a combination of multidimensional factors including club brand image, spectator experience, club characteristics and fan personal factors, with each factor shaping fans' loyal behaviors and attitudes through direct or indirect pathways. In other words, a stable fan loyalty relationship stems from multiple factors working in concert—such as the club cultivating a strong brand image and match experience, improving competitive performance, as well as fans themselves forming deep emotional bonds with the team, among other factors.

Theoretically, this study deepens the understanding of the mechanisms influencing fan loyalty, filling the research gap of a comprehensive review focused on “football club

fan loyalty.” On the basis of reviewing different theoretical models, this paper reveals the commonalities and complementarities of each model, laying a foundation for subsequently constructing a more integrated theoretical framework of fan loyalty. At the same time, by categorically summarizing the external factors influencing loyalty and their mechanisms of action, the study provides systematic references for sports managers: club management can thereby identify the key driving factors for enhancing fan loyalty (for example, brand image building, match-day service optimization, fan community engagement, etc.), and thus formulate more targeted marketing and operational strategies. In short, the findings of this study not only enrich the literature in the field of sport consumer behavior, but also have guiding significance for how to cultivate and strengthen fan loyalty in practice.

Despite integrating existing literature and offering some useful insights, this study has several limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, in terms of theoretical integration, there is a lack of in-depth analysis of potential conflicts and differences between different loyalty models (for example, differences between the three-element model and PCM in defining stages of loyalty); future research could attempt to construct an integrated model that combines multiple theoretical perspectives, and evaluate its applicability through empirical testing. Second, this study primarily discussed loyalty influencing factors based on mainstream international theoretical frameworks, and gave relatively insufficient consideration to the culturally specific psychological mechanisms of Chinese football fans. Therefore, subsequent research should pay more attention to model adaptation and modification in the local context, testing existing theories’ boundary conditions in the unique socio-cultural and sports market environment of China, and developing fan loyalty theories with local characteristics. Finally, with the deepening application of digital technology in the sports domain, the ways and forms of fan participation in teams are undergoing rapid changes. Future research is needed to delve into how emerging digital forms like social media, virtual viewing, and fan tokens are reshaping fan engagement, sense of identification and experience satisfaction, and thereby affecting the establishment and maintenance of loyal relationships. In summary, conducting in-depth research around directions such as theoretical integration, localization validation, and cultivating fan loyalty in the digital age will help further expand and enrich the field of

fan loyalty research, and also provide more forward-looking guidance for clubs to enhance fan loyalty in practice.

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