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**From Fan Satisfaction to Alienation: Factors Influencing Match
Attendance in the Context of a Football Club's Identity Loss**

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Doctoral dissertation

György Bodon

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I. INTRODUCTION

I.1 A sports economy context

A review of sports history is not the task of this dissertation, but placing the topic within its scholarly context is indispensable. From the historical development of ancient sports to the presentation of the modern sport—taking into account geographical differences—and to understanding the historical evolution of professional sports, an enormous amount of knowledge, extensive literature, hundreds of books, and thousands of scientific articles are available (see, for example, Adair, 1997; Holt, 2014; Mandell, 1984; Mason, 1989; Riess, 1990; Szymanski, 2008). It is noteworthy that, in recent decades, the development of the sports economy has accelerated rapidly (Szymanski, 2008).

The development of sports-related literature has been greatly motivated by the fact that, in recent decades, sports have evolved into a global enterprise whose interests include improving service quality, meeting and serving consumer and fan demands, and integrating sports into everyday life. As a result, sports economic research relates to various fields, such as social sciences (Maguire, 2014; Lüs, 1981), economics (Andreff & Szymanski, 2006; Gratton et al., 2012), politics (Houlihan, 2000; Allison, 2004), psychology (Cotterill, 2012; Kreme & Scully, 2003; Nicholls, 2021), anatomy (Broglio et al., 2011; Milner, 2019), media studies (Raney & Bryant, 2009; Rowe, 2003), culture (Maheu, 1963), health education (Dowling et al., 2012; Winnick & Porretta, 2016), education policy (Bennett, 1983), or defense (Hagen, 2013).

This research is embedded within this scholarly environment, with the dissertation's primary goal (in relation to attending matches) being the examination of factors influencing fan attachment and loyalty. Many influences shape relationships with fans. The uniqueness of sports lies in the excitement it contains (Pollard, 2017; Mehus, 2005), which is connected to performance (McMorris, 2014; Hausswirth & Mujika, 2013), the constant drive for improvement (Pitts et al., 1994; Gratton & Taylor, 2000), which demands personality development (Scanlan et al., 1993), experiential enjoyment (Lochbaum & Roberts, 1993), and many other factors.

In terms of its economic power, sports represent a significant business opportunity (Harvey & Houle, 1994; Kirkpatrick et al., 2018; Noll & Zimbalist, 2011), as mass interest is considerable (Washington & Karen, 2001), and the provision of services generates revenue (Porter & Chin, 2012), which has a substantial multiplier effect on related industries.

With facility development (Fried & Kastel, 2020; Santo, 2005), the potential for industrial production of sports-related equipment (Kwon & Armstrong, 2002; Wright, 1999), sharing content delivered through media (Clavio, 2020; Newman et al., 2017; Solberg & Helland, 2011), or the success of scientific collaboration (Kirkpatrick et al., 2018), and the flourishing of recognized sports brands (Bouchet et al., 2013), sports has been able to evolve into an industry built in the international market. Modern sports have a spectacular, community-forming power and, beyond their functional operation, carry messages (Hunt et al., 1999; Rowe, 2003). This economic potential is further strengthened through media broadcasts, sponsorship agreements, and merchandising, which synergistically increase the size and value of the sports market (Andreff & Szymanski, 2006). Professional sports are not only a cultural and social phenomenon but also a complex economic ecosystem.

The development process of modern sports internationally requires sports enterprises and organizations to continuously develop their marketing activities to transform the expectations of consumers and sports-minded fans and communities into economic value, to face the critical issues and challenges of the sports industry in growing economies (Zhang, 2018), and to establish a sustainable business model that serves fan (consumer) expectations. From the beginning, marketing has been a driving force behind the increased sellability of sports and sports products introduced into commerce, thereby playing an essential role in the sports economy (Dees et al., 2022; Ekmekci & Ekmekçi, 2010; Kirkpatrick et al., 2018; Milne & McDonald, 1999). The task of sports marketing is to support and facilitate the operation of an effective system through strategic planning, economic tools, and human resource management, based on market knowledge (Desbordes & Richelieu, 2012; Zhang et al., 2017).

I 2 The purpose of the research

The development of fans' attachment to a team in a developed sports economy is an essential and prioritized task (Marques et al., 2018). In Hungary, this has been an unresolved issue for decades. At the same time, spectacular investments have led to the construction of new stadiums, whose utilization in domestic football league matches could be significantly improved (Balogh & Bácsné Bába, 2024; Kajos et al., 2017). To gain a deeper understanding of this issue, this study also builds on Kassay's (2013) research, which examines the operations and positioning of domestic clubs.

The present dissertation also focuses heavily on sports economics, particularly the impact and questions related to fan behavior and attendance figures. The academic literature includes numerous studies on fan behavior (highlighting key works such as Arroba et al., 2021; Bauer et al., 2008; Cohen et al., 2017; Dwyer, 2011; Funk & James, 2001; Harris & Ogbonna, 2008; Izzo et al., 2014; Murrell & Dietz, 1992; Stavros et al., 2014; Stevens & Rosenberger, 2012; Yoshida et al., 2015), which contribute to establishing the research environment for this dissertation. In Hungary, relatively few studies have examined attendance at matches in the sports marketing academic literature. Within this area, the literature exploring the relationship between fan satisfaction/dissatisfaction and match attendance is also minimal. The main research goal of this dissertation is twofold. First, given domestic specifics, it examines the relationships among fan identification, attachment, loyalty, and satisfaction. The second key aim is to shed light on which sports economic factors can influence fan feelings and their weakening, and whether this has business/economic relevance, potentially offering solutions for managing issues related to match attendance and spectator numbers.

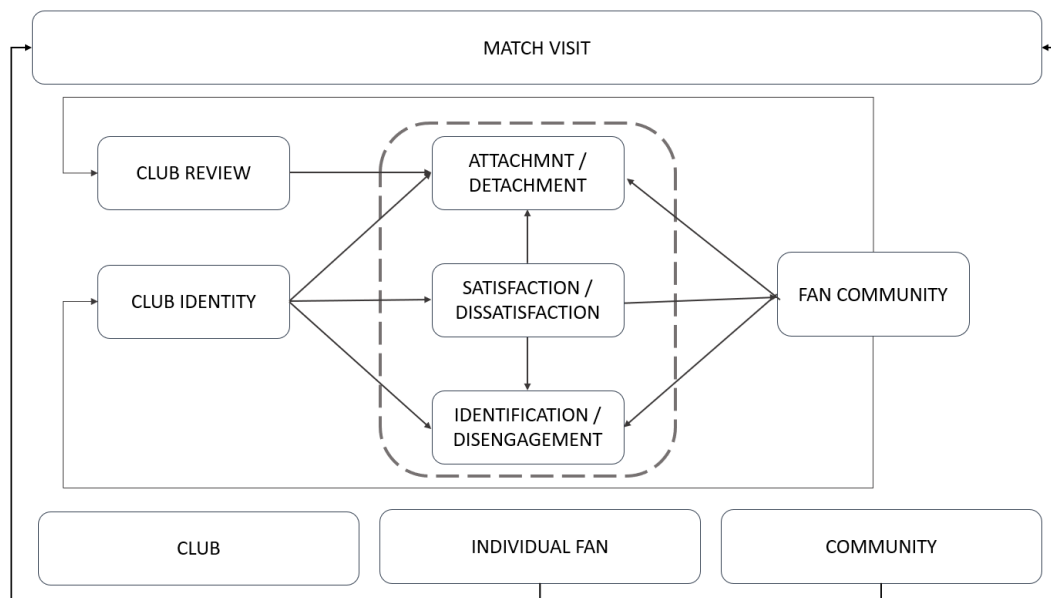
The doctoral research investigates MOL Fehérvár FC (2022), a club experiencing a difficult period in Hungary's OTP Bank Liga, the top-tier football league, analyzing how the club's reputation influences fans' mindset, attachment, emotions, and identification and loyalty with the club. The study explores the factors shaping the club's reputation, the psychological connection of fans to the club, and the relationship between the desire to attend matches and attachment to the club. The research primarily examines fan attachment from a sports marketing perspective, with the primary goal of understanding fans' motivations for attending matches. The research areas include sports, sports economics, and sports marketing, with the research environment being domestic football. Although the study focuses on Hungarian football clubs, throughout all phases, it aimed to produce results—apart from local uniqueness—that add value beyond the local context to the international literature and provide insights into general characteristics of fan communities across sports disciplines. The research methodology was developed with a focus on a comprehensive literature review, which laid the theoretical foundation for the study.

The conceptual model is based on several relevant theoretical frameworks from sports marketing and consumer behavior. It incorporates Funk and James' (2001) Psychological Continuum Model, which describes the stages of sports consumer commitment.

Bee and Havitz's (2010) work, which distinguishes between attitudinal and behavioral dimensions of fan loyalty, and the service quality–satisfaction–behavioral intention model proposed by Clemes et al. (2011), especially emphasizing the role of emotional responses and perceived value.

The contribution of this dissertation to these theories lies in integrating the concept of emotional alienation—previously mainly discussed in sociological contexts—into the study of sports consumer-brand relationships, and in illustrating its impact on loyalty and commitment through visual modeling. The research covers topics related to the parts of fan life and emotional experience, such as motivation, attachment, attitude, trust, identification, loyalty, satisfaction, and dissatisfaction that can lead to weakened bonds, along with their various aspects (see 1. Figure).

1. Figure: The research model



Source: own editing

This iterative, reflexive approach not only enabled the fine-tuning of research directions but also expanded the existing body of knowledge and led to a more nuanced interpretation of relevant conceptual frameworks, thereby increasing the scientific validity and methodological rigor of the research. The research also extended into numerous subfields where there is currently no comprehensive, well-developed scholarly background on the relationship system between the club and its fans. This gap is particularly evident in the examination of the club’s social perception, political influence, and the mechanisms of fan alienation.

Exploring these topics is particularly important because these dimensions complexly influence fan identity, match attendance willingness, and the club's long-term social embeddedness. It is especially relevant to study these areas because understanding, nurturing, and improving the relationship between fans and the club is a fundamental condition of today's sports economy.

However, the literature review also revealed that the concept of an “invisible contract,” based on shared identity, implicit expectations, and mutual loyalty, is rarely addressed in studies examining the relationship between clubs and fans.

The breach of this contract can be a key driver of fan alienation, with complex and multifaceted consequences for the club's social embeddedness, economic stability, and long-term reputation. Based on this, there is a need to understand and model the process of fan alienation and the trends leading to it. The dissertation aims to present these interrelations, recognizing the value-creating aspect of the fan community's presence, from the fans' perspective, by analyzing their opinions. Following the basic concepts in the literature, the dissertation identifies fundamental, broad research questions for the field. The research primarily relies on positive, constructive descriptions of fan feelings from the literature, which show that fan satisfaction is related to many topics, including match attendance habits, perceptions of the club, fan emotions and identification, and the development of loyalty to the sports brand. The dissertation relates to this part of the literature. Additionally, it adapts and highlights the effects of negative processes (disidentification) less discussed in the literature, drawing from general consumer research, emphasizing the impact of sports services on fan attachment, grouping factors influencing club perception, illustrating the overall fan opinions, and exploring new perspectives, areas, and findings in sports.

The scientific contribution of the research lies in examining emotional attachment, loyalty, and alienation in sports consumption within an integrated model, whereas literature typically treats these topics separately.

The empirical data support the relationships between these factors, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of sports consumer behavior and providing a basis for more effective marketing and management strategies. The dissertation also offers a visually interpretable model that enriches the theoretical framework of sports marketing and provides a new perspective for developing fan-brand relationships. Based on the literature review, it can be concluded that sports consumer behavior, emotional attachment, and loyalty have already received significant research attention independently, while the study of alienation in the context of sports consumption is relatively new and underrepresented.

The analysis of these factors in an integrated model has been limited to date. This research creates a conceptual framework that organizes the examined variables and visually illustrates their mutual influence. The novelty of the dissertation lies not only in its theoretical synthesis but also in its offering of emotion-based loyalty models directly applicable to sports marketing.

These models contribute to managing alienation and deepening brand relationships, thus providing practically relevant support for the strategic development of sports brands.

I.3 The background of the topic selection

The background of the topic concerns the low attendance at domestic football league matches and the associated problems (Balogh & Bácsné Bába, 2024), such as revenue losses. Understanding and approaching the problem scientifically can contribute to solutions that may increase a club's revenue (Siegfried & Peterson, 2000), and the increased resources (ideally or even) can lead to improvements in service quality (Tsitskariet al., 2006) and fan satisfaction (Köse et al., 2021; Madrigal, 1995).

From an economic perspective, the sport product (the game) is generally produced, delivered, and consumed simultaneously (Gladden & Sutton, 2009). The presence of sports consumers underpins the professional spectator sports industry, which is the main reason why business stakeholders are attracted to investing in sports (Mason, 1999), generating revenue through both direct and indirect consumption behaviors for the state, the sport environment, the league, and the teams.

In sports, there is the possibility of losing, which can pose various risks to the operation of a sports organization, but the stability of a club is achieved through planned, built service quality and the management of club values (Castellanos & Sánchez, 2007). It is generally observed that in Hungarian league football matches, there is significant unused capacity relative to stadium capacity. Although higher spectator numbers are observed for some key rivalries and special events, overall trends and statistical indicators point to a structural problem with match attendance. This phenomenon indicates that the sports business sector, particularly sports marketing, needs development, as there is considerable growth potential in ticket revenues. Consequently, the modest spectator numbers negatively impact on the demand for related services. Overall, this highlights that domestic sports enterprises possess a strong yet currently untapped economic potential, making the conscious application of sports marketing theories and methods, as well as the integration of a scientific approach into strategic decision-making, both justified and necessary.

I.4 The structural organization of the dissertation

Throughout the dissertation, the research topics, processes, and results are presented in a unified, coherent framework. The introductory chapter discusses the general economic context of sports and the significance of sports marketing, laying the foundation for defining the research objectives and background of the topic and preparing the literature review. The second chapter reviews relevant literature on the dissertation's subject, focusing on the interpretation of the sports environment and context, with particular attention to fans' consumer behavior, thereby theoretically underpinning the examined issues. The third chapter presents the research methodological framework and the results of the primary investigations. This section aims to describe the research questions, the study's context, and the stages of the doctoral research, and to provide a comprehensive overview of both qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches. The fourth section presents the results of the empirical analysis, while the final section summarizes the study's findings.

II. LITERATURE BACKGROUND

The purpose of the literature review in the dissertation is to present the theoretical background of the research topic and to uncover the scientific findings that underpin the current study. The chapter reviews relevant domestic and international literature, highlighting the most important theoretical approaches, conceptual frameworks, and empirical research results. A systematic review of the literature not only defines the scientific context of the research but also helps identify the research gap that justifies undertaking this work. During the review, we aim to critically analyze existing results, highlight contradictions, gaps, and questions that require further investigation.

II.1 Brand Management in Sports

A key element in building a sports brand is the brand community, that is, the fan community, because fans' loyalty and identification with the team help shape the sports brand's identity and value. This process is not solely based on emotional factors but also has direct economic impacts, as long-term loyalty can provide a stable revenue stream, making sports marketing strategically significant (Zhang, 2024).

In the sports world, brands of sports disciplines, teams, leagues, or even sports personalities compete on various platforms (Burton, 2004), and managing these brands, as well as the organizations behind them, is aimed at achieving victory, securing favorable rankings, establishing economic dominance, developing athletes, and creating the entertainment function of sport (Richelieu & Webb, 2024). Kunkel (2013) noted that individual sports brands exist within a sports brand ecosystem, where they interact with one another, forming vertical and horizontal connections with other sports brands and external brands. Buser et al. (2022) also emphasized the importance of understanding this dynamic network, noting that studying sports ecosystems is crucial for uncovering economic relationships within them. This dissertation focuses on the role and significance of the fan community within the field of sports ecosystems. Couvelaere and Richelieu (2005) found that strong sports brands can improve economic performance by leveraging fans' emotional attachment. Sports are unique in that they carry social, economic, and emotional dimensions simultaneously while being produced and consumed as services (Mullin et al., 2000).

The globalization of the sports industry and the blurring of boundaries between sports and entertainment industries have intensified competition among sports brands and increased rivalry between sports and entertainment brands (Kahiya et al., 2023). According to Brand et al. (2023), today's competition is more intense than ever, which justifies sports managers intentionally building and nurturing strong brands to ensure the long-term economic success of sports organizations. In this context, one of the key tasks of sports management is to build fan trust and loyalty, enabling sports teams to unlock their business potential, increase brand value, and generate new revenue streams. These revenues can come not only from the sale of sports products and services within the arena but also from related services outside the arena (Bottomley & Doyle, 1996; Dawar & Anderson, 1994; Gustafson, 2001; Sunde & Brodie, 1993). Long-term fan engagement thus creates not only emotional but also tangible economic value for the sports brand.

II.1.1 A sports brand

According to Tapp (2004), in the sports sector, spectators should be viewed as buyers, and football clubs as brands. Like other sectors, the interests and needs of fans—consumers—must be identified and satisfied. With this knowledge, it is important from a sports brand management perspective to summarize what a sports brand means and, more generally, what the term 'brand' entails.

The professional concept of 'brand' developed in the eighteenth century, although the idea of a brand existed earlier in general, such as in ancient and medieval armies, trademarks, or nations (Fernández, 2020). Today, the new goal of brand presentation is to strengthen the connection between the brand name and the product.

A name and/or symbol (such as a logo, trademark, or packaging design) ensures brand distinguishability, serves to identify the goods or services, and differentiates these products or services from competitors and their offerings, as summarized in numerous studies on general products (Chih-Chung et al., 2012; Dehdashti et al., 2012; Farquhar, 1989; Ghodeswar, 2008; Ishak, 2013; Keller, 2020; Kotler, 1991; Louro & Cunha, 2001; Murphy, 1998; Onkvisit & Shaw, 1989). This applies to sports as well (Underwood et al., 2001; Ward et al., 1999; Keller, 1993; Gladden & Funk, 2001, 2002; Hunt et al.; Maderer et al., 2016). According to Belk (1988), a brand allows consumers to express their self-image, which can be especially significant in sports, as fan engagement can evolve into a lifelong relationship. Couvelaere and Richelieu (2005) also confirm this, stating that successful brands quickly establish strong emotional and personal connections with their consumer base.

It can be concluded that a strong brand can help, and should help, a professional sports team leverage the emotional bond with fans to build trust and foster fan loyalty (Holt, 1995). Generally, brand commitment involves the passion consumers have for the brand, stemming from the strength of the consumer-brand relationship (Leckie et al., 2016; Uncles et al., 2003). Therefore, it can be said that every successful brand represents its loyal customers (Wang et al., 2011).

Compared to competitors, the brand owner's intention is to achieve advantages through the brand. Ghodeswar (2008) found that organizations must thoroughly understand their consumers' thinking and behavior, demonstrate their product or service features, and know their competitors. Understanding consumer needs can lead to a stronger brand. According to Keller (2005), strong brands offer numerous benefits to organizations, retailers, consumers, and society, helping consumers find and identify products, evaluate their quality, and form attitudes and expectations.

The essential tool for developing strong brands is appropriate communication between the organization and consumers (in sports, between the club/team and fans). The proliferation of communication channels means fans can access their favorite teams and players from anywhere, further increasing the visibility of sports brands. As a result, managing communication related to sports brands has become especially crucial and a key task in brand management (Kerr & Gladden, 2008; Maderer et al., 2016).

Consumers can be highly and continuously involved in staying updated on the brand and category, which can influence their future purchasing decisions—whether it’s buying tickets or determining their level of engagement (Schmidt & Spreng, 1996). Parihar et al. (2019) found that the goal of a brand is to enhance performance by strengthening the consumer-brand relationship. A sports team with a strong brand can foster and nurture fans’ attachment and loyalty (Funk & James, 2001), thereby generating additional revenue through the sale of products, services, and goods related to the team’s operations.

II.1.2 Sports Brand Value

Since fans' attachment to a club or team is significantly influenced by the brand, brand value is one of the most critical areas in sports from a business perspective, requiring proper management and shaping. Managing this at a strategic level not only increases short-term revenue but also is a fundamental condition for maintaining long-term fan loyalty and economic stability. The strength of a brand is closely related to its value (Godman & Pitcher, 2023). In modern sports, it is not only an opportunity but also essential for a professional sports team to create brand value by building on the emotional connection with its fans (Grant et al., 2011). Reinforcing this, Kotler (2012) generally— not just in sports—stated that a brand with high brand value is an asset, which is why its management is of utmost importance.

Brand value can be defined as added value (Farquhar, 1989; Leuthesser, 1988; Yoo, 2000), and it can be determined in various ways (Aaker, 1992; Atligan et al., 2005; Keller, 1993; Leone et al., 2006; Papadopoulos, 2011). Elements of its definition may include favorable impressions, attitudes, and behavioral dispositions (Rangaswamy et al., 1993); the added value provided by the brand name (Farquhar, 1989; Kamakura and Russell, 1993); usefulness (Kamakura and Russell, 1993); as well as loyalty and image (Shocker and Weitz, 1988).

When defining the components of brand value, Aaker (1992) distinguished brand associations, brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, and other brand elements (such as patents, trademarks, and channel relationships). For a professional sports team, brand value largely relies on the emotional connection with fans (Underwood et al., 2001).

In the sports environment, Gladden et al. (1998) describe brand value as the value that fans attribute to their team’s name and symbols. Blumrodt (2017) also emphasizes the vital importance of (sports) brand value in creating long-term advantages for professional sports teams.

Arslan (2017) highlights the importance of service quality dimensions to brand value in football clubs. Boyle and Magnusson (2007) point out that managing the brand value of sports teams is one of the most critical and uncertain areas of the business side of sports. Regarding brand value, Temporal (2011) emphasizes the long-term security of strong brands, growth opportunities, and the potential for higher sustainable profits, because, according to him, strong brands achieve competitiveness, premium prices, higher sales volume, economies of scale, lower costs, and greater demand security. Building consumer trust increases brand value and strengthens a brand's position against competitors, a key expectation in the strategic plans of economic organizations.

Further, from a competitive perspective, Pelsmacker et al. (2001) note that well-known brands with high brand value are better able to create favorable attitudes and perceptions, which increase sales and can lead consumers to perceive higher quality, providing a good reason to purchase the product. Over the past decades, numerous researchers in the sports environment have developed measurement scales (Bauer et al., 2008; Biscaia et al., 2013; Gladden & Funk, 2001). These studies also explored how brand activities can be measured, how brand value can be created, and aimed to understand the background of brand associations (Bauer et al., 2008; Biscaia et al., 2016; Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005; Gladden & Funk, 2002). These measurement options can contribute to the success of sports brand management.

II.1.3 Sports Brand Management

One of the key factors in successful brand building is understanding the development of brand identity, knowing what a brand represents, and expressing that identity effectively (Aaker, 1996). According to Kunkel (2013), sports brand management is an environmental determinant that can influence consumers' psychological relationships with a sport, league, or team.

The idea of managing (sports) brands (e.g., clubs, teams, personalities, events, or competitive environments) has become the dominant paradigm in the sports market (Doyle et al., 2013), and the importance of sports brand management has gained increasing recognition in recent years (Carlson & Donovan, 2013; Gladden & Funk, 2002). Brand et al. (2023) argue that perspectives on sports brand management are deeply rooted in the notion that brand owners strategically develop and manage their brands.

Today, sports brands are predominantly viewed as being constructed and strategically controlled by brand owners (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Doyle et al., 2023; Manoli, 2020; Williams et al., 2022), and building consumer trust (e.g., among fans) can lead to increased brand equity (Choi, 2001; Moorman et al., 1993; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Yoo et al., 2000).

Blumrod (2017) considers brand building vital for professional sports teams, as strong brands provide numerous benefits for sports organizations (Bello & Holbrook, 1995; Onkvisit & Shaw, 1989; Pelsmacker, 2001; Temporal, 2011; Turley & Moore, 1995). Furthermore, brand building supports organizations in increasing product prices, improving the effectiveness of marketing communication, positively influencing brand development, and reducing advertising costs (Rezaei & Sharifian, 2021), thereby further enhancing brand value.

Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000) emphasize that one of the significant challenges of brand building lies in strengthening consumer attitudes to foster deep relationships. Accordingly, building a sports constituency is an essential task for sports organizations, and the creation and development of fan communities are integral to team brand building (Wear et al., 2018). It is imperative in the context of professional sports teams and clubs (Biscaia et al., 2016; Jaber et al., 2014), where sports brand management functions as an environmental determinant influencing consumers' psychological relationships with a sport, league, or team (Kunkel, 2013).

According to Brand et al. (2023), contemporary sports brand research largely follows the dominant logic of brand owners, resulting in a unilateral perspective that neglects fan involvement in planning processes, despite the significant role that fan communities may play in brand building.

While acknowledging brand owners' responsibility for managing brands, the evolution of brand management tasks highlights the potential role of fans in brand-building. This raises the question of whether and to what extent fan communities are involved in and responsible for distributing brand management tasks.

A widely accepted contemporary concept addressing joint participation is co-creation (Kim et al., 2020; Kolyperas et al., 2019; McDonald & Karg, 2014; Sanahuja-Peris & Ginesta, 2024). The relevance of this dissertation topic is further supported by Ross et al. (2006), who emphasize the added value of fans and spectator experiences in relation to the economic value of sport. They argue that excluding fans from the operation of sports brand equity may limit the ability to fully understand the construction and development of brand value within the spectator sport environment.

In summary, when the relationship between fans/sport consumers and teams/clubs/management is disrupted, or when clubs possess only superficial knowledge of the mechanisms that sustain this relationship, brand building may stagnate, and significant value may be lost. Therefore, understanding the relationships between consumers and sports organizations can provide substantial benefits for sports managers. Based on the above, three key actors can be identified in sports brand management: the team/club, the fan/fan community, and the surrounding environment, including economic, social, cultural, and political factors that directly or indirectly influence the operations and value of sports brands. The quality of interaction and cooperation among these actors significantly shapes brand value, alongside the broader sports brand ecosystem that also exerts influence.

However, fans' relationships with clubs or teams are shaped not only by individual and personal factors but also by the collective strength and influence of fan communities. These communities strengthen brand attachment through shared experiences and identity elements, thereby directly affecting clubs' social perception, economic opportunities, and long-term sustainability. In sport, fan communities can be considered brand communities, as will be discussed in detail in the following chapter.

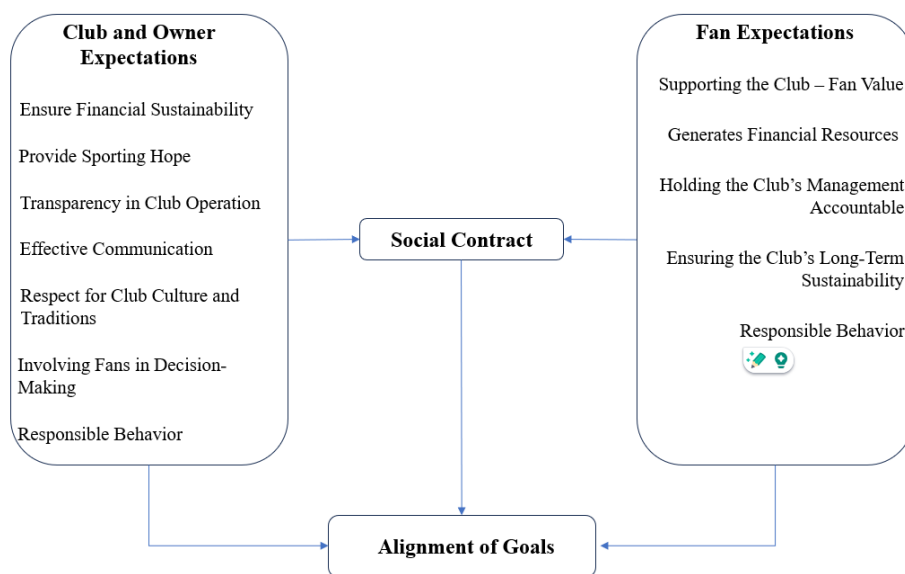
II.1.4 The Fan Community as a Brand Community

Research on brand communities has gained increasing attention over the past decade due to the growing complexity of modern business and the need to maintain profitability (Heere et al., 2011). According to Grant et al. (2011), extending the brand community perspective to sports teams is neither an exaggeration nor a stretch. It can provide valuable insights into how sports organizations can build communities around their teams. Sports brand building and brand management facilitate the formation and development of sports consumer communities and the establishment of emotional foundations of belonging. They promote attachment and commitment to the brand and may also influence fan attendance motivation and purchase intentions. Underwood et al. (2001) describe the nature of fan existence by highlighting consumer/fan self-expression, self-definition, and intrinsic motivation related to sharing experiences. They argue that consuming products or services provides a sense of self-definition and serves as a means of signaling this commitment to others. Chernatony and McDonald (1998) emphasize that the goal of a successful brand is to establish a high-quality relationship in which consumers experience commitment and a sense of belonging that may even develop into passion. This notion forms the foundation for the early stages of brand community formation.

Brand communities of sport consumers (fans) differ in several respects from those associated with traditional consumer products. These differences primarily stem from the fact that sport-related brand communities involve much stronger emotional engagement, identity-based attachment, and shared community experiences, making them more intense and enduring than those of conventional consumer goods.

High levels of sport consumer involvement and emotional attachment, along with more intense attention to sport, result in stronger and more persistent fandom compared to other forms of entertainment (Sutton, 2000; Zillmann & Paulus, 1993). Fan brand communities are characterized by long-term spectator interaction, the shared experience of historic moments and matches, and the creation of traditions and rituals (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). Based on the findings of Tapp and Clowes (2002), these communities also indirectly influence sport consumer behavior by shaping team identity.

2. Figure: Summary of the Normative Social Contract between the Club, Owners, and Fans



Source: Based on Middling et al. (2025), author’s own compilation

According to Babiak and Wolfe (2009), the sense of unity and excitement generated by sport can enhance the effectiveness of community marketing activities conducted by clubs. Marques et al. (2018) examine how club strategies and sports marketing activities strengthen the relationship between clubs and fans, emphasizing that fans’ individual interests and emotions help build personal relationships with sports brands, shaping how they connect with and relate to them (self-brand connection).

One related study was among the first to apply social contract theory to football (Middling et al., 2025). The authors argue that the normative social contract they identified reflects dissatisfaction with the current governance practices of the examined football clubs (2. Figure).

According to Grant et al. (2011), from a market-oriented perspective, brand communities enable (sport) organizations to communicate more effectively and develop rich relationships with consumers. At the same time, sports fans share their experiences and opinions about their teams, making sharing and community spirit integral parts of sport and jointly constructing its meaning (Parganas et al., 2017), while also strengthening the long-term sustainability of fan identity and loyalty to the club.

II.1.5 Brand Connection

According to Keller (1993), brand image refers to the set of associations linked to a brand in consumers' memory, reflecting how the brand is perceived. Leone et al. (2006) define brand associations as all thoughts, feelings, images, and experiences connected to a brand in consumers' minds; collectively, these constitute a network of brand-related associations stored in memory. As part of brand image, the colors, names, and logos created by clubs and communicated to fans serve as important markers for differentiation from competitors (Keller & Lehmann, 2006) and as indicators of team brand identity (Lee et al., 2018).

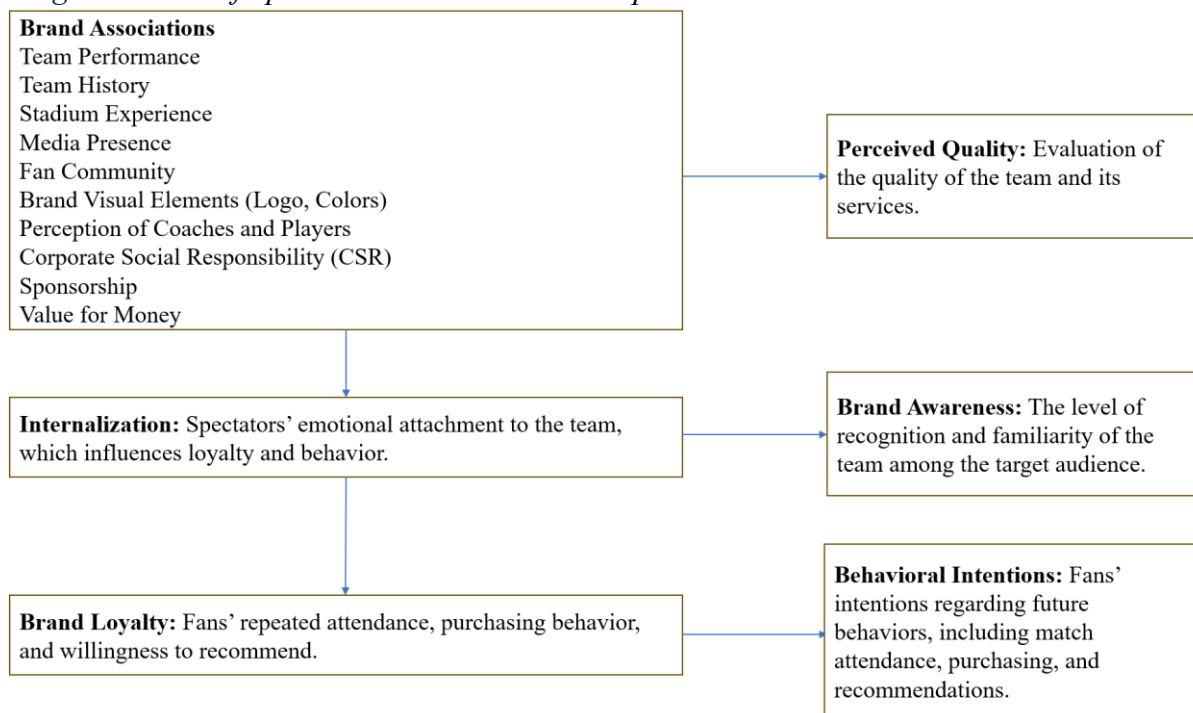
According to Burton and Hyatt (2022), a team's ability to create a meaningful and well-articulated brand through its name, logos, color schemes, and other brand identifiers plays a significant role in shaping its community and competitive positioning. By informing and facilitating fan identification, the brand becomes one of the most valuable assets of a football club (Yun, 2021).

A brand essence based on emotional and self-expressive benefits provides a higher-order foundation for relationships that are less vulnerable to product-related changes and more easily adaptable to new contexts (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). Funk and Pastore (2000) emphasize the role of subjective beliefs and cognitive structures in understanding the attitudinal components of brand associations.

The central element of the model is "Brand Associations," which encompasses factors such as team performance, history, stadium experience, media presence, fan community, visual elements (logos and colors), perceptions of players and coaches, corporate social responsibility (CSR), sponsorship, and value for money.

These associations influence spectators' emotional identification (internalization), which is directly related to brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, and behavioral intentions. In addition to associations, brand loyalty is a key component of brand equity (Aaker, 1992), particularly in sport, where it is reinforced through emotional commitment, shared identity, and long-term relationship maintenance. In the context of sports brands, loyalty is not based solely on rational choice but is closely linked to fan experiences, a sense of community belonging, and the symbolic meanings that consumers attach to the brand. The emotional involvement, identity-based attachment, and shared community experiences of sport consumer brand communities are especially intense, with traditions and rituals fostering community formation (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Sutton, 2000; Zillmann & Paulus, 1993).

3. Figure: Model of Sport Consumers' Relationship with the Brand



Source: Based on Ross et al. (2006) and Biscaia et al. (2013), author's own compilation

The latter category includes fans' future behaviors, such as match attendance, attachment to the club, brand-related purchasing decisions, and willingness to recommend. In examining connections to sports brands, it is important to present the Spectator-Based Brand Equity (SBBE) model in greater detail, as developed by Ross et al. (2006) and Biscaia et al. (2013). This model specifically analyzes sport consumers' relationships with brands and identifies the components of brand equity across multiple dimensions (3. Figure).

These sources therefore directly support the view that, in the context of sports brands, brand loyalty is not merely a rational decision but is strongly linked to emotional experiences, a sense of community belonging, and symbolic meanings. The development and maintenance of loyalty are further influenced by factors such as experiencing successes and failures with a team or athlete, long-standing brand traditions, and ongoing interaction and communication with fans.

All of this suggests that, in sport, brand loyalty is not simply a category of consumer behavior but a complex phenomenon with emotional and social dimensions that fundamentally contribute to the long-term maintenance and enhancement of brand equity. The following chapter of this dissertation provides a more detailed discussion and analysis of this topic.

II.2 Psychological Attachment in Sport

Intense emotions associated with sport often lead to strong bonds between fans and clubs/teams (Mahony et al., 2000).

Psychological commitment is reflected in interest in sport, attendance at events, and active involvement within the team or club environment (Bee & Havitz, 2010). In the sporting context, fans' attachment, through psychological connections, may relate to coaches and players, the team, the league, the sport itself, and the stadium (Bács & Kozma, 2018; Rose et al., 2021; Tachis & Tzetzis, 2015). The level of psychological involvement may vary among consumers (Kunkel, 2013). Jones (1997) notes that while an average spectator may quickly forget the event they observed, devoted fans maintain their interest, experience increasingly intense emotions toward their team, integrate this attachment into their personal identity, and become willing to devote their daily lives to their team or its community.

According to James (2002), this psychological relationship between fans and clubs/teams manifests in consistent, enduring behavior and expressions of fan trust.

II.2.1 The Importance of Emotions in Sport

The emotions that create and sustain psychological attachment are often closely related to athletic performance. Oliver (1981) emphasizes the importance of performance, arguing that dissatisfaction with a brand can be explained by the gap between expectations and performance, as performance is directly linked to fans' (sport consumers') emotions.

Emotions not only directly influence fans but also affect athletic performance, thereby impacting team and club success. Numerous studies confirm that emotions can influence athletic performance, as individuals' emotional states affect motivation and physical and cognitive functioning (Botterill & Brown, 2002; Deci, 1971; Hanin, 2000).

Consequently, fan emotions influence athletic performance and, in turn, team effectiveness and club success, thereby contributing to economic value creation. From this perspective, fan presence and activity are clearly important for clubs and teams. Fans are no longer passive recipients but can become active value-creating partners (Kolyperas et al., 2019; McDonald & Karg, 2014). Therefore, managing and shaping fan emotions and facilitating co-creation with fans significantly influence the success of sports organizations.

In studies of value creation, fan engagement, and fan identification, increasing attention has been paid to emotions experienced in sport. According to Collins (1990), long-term emotions are linked to tradition, symbols, and shared community experiences, whereas match-related experiences primarily influence short-term fan emotions.

A winning match generates joy and happiness, whereas defeat by a favorite team may result in disappointment, sadness, and despair for both fans (Cottingham, 2012) and athletes (Jones, 2003). Accordingly, competition outcomes affect fans' emotions and self-esteem, and the joy or disappointment experienced may also influence behavior, in some cases, encouraging aggressive responses. Several scholars emphasize the importance of emotions in sport (Branscombe & Wann, 1995; Madrigal, 1995; Wann et al., 1996), noting that both positive and negative emotions occur during sport consumption. Moreover, these contrasting emotions may compensate for one another (Tinson et al., 2023). For example, the negative effects of club decisions may be offset by positive experiences and attachment within fan communities. Trail et al. (2002) argue that fans' affective states directly influence consumption behavior. This phenomenon is related to BIRG (Basking in Reflected Glory; Cialdini et al., 1976) and CORF (Cutting Off Reflected Failure; Snyder et al., 1986), which have also been observed in sports contexts (Jensen et al., 2012).

Accordingly, sports consumers are more likely to watch events expected to have positive outcomes than those anticipated to end negatively.

In sport, the emotional spectrum is typically broad (Holt, 1995; Kwak et al., 2011), primarily related to team performance (Hirt et al., 1992; Scholes, 2004). However, many other factors, such as the brand, the team, individual athletes, and the club, can also elicit emotions among fans. According to Zillmann et al. (1989), the intensity of fans' emotional attachment depends on the extent to which they enjoy good performance and are affected by poor performance. Lee et al. (2018) highlight the distinction between perceived performance (on and off the field) and emotional attachment to sports teams. Fan emotions may also contribute to the development of trust in clubs and teams.

Moorman et al. (1993) define trust as consumers' willingness to rely on a brand endorsed by an organization. Morgan and Hunt (1994) argue that trust exists only when one party believes the other is reliable and trustworthy. Trust is essential for establishing and maintaining long-term relationships (Rousseau et al., 1998), particularly for sports organizations seeking to retain long-term fan commitment.

Trust and attachment are closely related concepts and are connected to other constructs in sport, such as loyalty and identification. As Mahony et al. (2000, p. 15) famously stated: "Marriages come and go. So do jobs, hometowns, and friendships. But a man's attachment to a sports team? That is a bond that holds the heart." The literature extensively addresses team attachment (Funk & James, 2006; Zhao et al., 2024). In marketing, attachment plays a key role in understanding brand relationships. However, because sport is an emotional endeavor, identifying the components of attachment is not straightforward. In sport, emotional attachment is rooted in passion, intimacy, and commitment, which shape fan loyalty. Fans develop deep and passionate emotional relationships with their teams, strengthening commitment and encouraging sustained support (Broadbent et al., 2011).

Attachment has been widely studied in both general interpersonal relationships (Bowlby, 1982) and relationships with sports teams (Funk & James, 2001, 2006). Psychological attachment is often discussed alongside team loyalty in sports literature (Neale & Funk, 2006). This attachment includes clubs' history and traditions, which form part of brand heritage (Urde et al., 2007). Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982) suggests that individuals can develop psychological bonds with specific objects. Building on this theory, Dwyer (2015) concludes that emotional attachment to sports teams involves both cognitive feelings, which may be viewed as "investments," and affective feelings, which function as "dividends" derived from the relationship. Individual attachment patterns may also significantly influence attachment to sports teams (Leventhal et al., 2021).

The concept of attachment is closely related to identification; therefore, fostering team identification is an essential task for sports organizations.

Identification represents a psychological bond that fans develop with their teams (Jones, 2000; Özgen & Argan, 2018). It is associated with team image, traditions, values, and acceptance of community norms. Research on team identification, largely rooted in Wann et al. (1994), indicates that identification is related to multiple factors, including competitive outcomes (Wann & Dolan, 1994), team knowledge and traditions (Wann & Branscombe, 1995), emotions (Wann & Branscombe, 1992; Wann et al., 1994), motivations (Fink et al., 2002), self-esteem (Wann & Branscombe, 1992), perceived influence (Wann et al., 1994), and beliefs in personal competence (Hirt et al., 1992; Madrigal, 1995). According to Ashforth (1989), team identification is the spectators' attachment to a team and their experience of team successes and failures as their own.

Newson et al. (2023) further note that team losses may lead to extreme fan attachment through shared dysphoria that fosters identity fusion. Wann and Pierce (2003) define team identification as fans' psychological and behavioral commitment that creates attachment to the experience, becomes habitual, and results in expected loyalty (brand loyalty in the context of sports brands). Theodorakis et al. (2010) argue that fan identification is preceded by factors such as the desire for community membership, the influence of socialization agents, and perceived similarity with players. Wann and Branscombe (1992) found that fans who exhibit strong psychological attachment or identification with their favorite sports brands demonstrate increased consumption behavior.

Stevens and Rosenberg (2012) emphasize that since team identification and consumer satisfaction are malleable, clubs must actively manage all processes related to fan identification. Identification also has a significant positive effect on impulsive sport-related purchasing (Kwon & Armstrong, 2002).

According to Cohen et al. (2017), individuals identify with organizations or teams when these organizations or teams represent values they personally endorse. Therefore, not only is fans' identification with teams and their values important, but also the identification of players, coaches, and management with club values, which often originate from community values.

The classification of emotional categories in this study is based on the literature on sport marketing and affective psychology, particularly the work of Funk and James (2001) and Madrigal (2008), who examined the role of emotions in fan behavior and brand loyalty.

The purpose of this categorization is to distinguish emotional responses that provide positive reinforcement (e.g., joy, pride) from those that evoke negative reactions (e.g., disappointment, anger). This structure enables targeted emotional analysis and supports the refinement of brand strategies related to sporting events (1. Table).

1. Table: A Thematic but Non-Exhaustive Classification of Emotions Relevant in the Sport Consumer Context

Emotion Category	Examples
Positive Emotions	Joy, Pride (Madrigal, 2008); Trust (Moorman et al., 1993); Positive Emotions across the Four Stages of Attachment (Funk & James, 2001); Happiness (Ekman & Cordaro, 2011); BIRG – Emotional Identification and Positive Social Self-Enhancement (Cialdini et al., 1976)
Negative Emotions	Anger, Fear, Surprise, Sadness, Disgust, Contempt (Ekman & Cordaro, 2011); Failure (Snyder et al., 1986); Disappointment, Regret (Zeelenberg & Pieter, 2004); Anger, Disappointment, Regret, Worry (Yi & Baumgartner, 2004); Loss of Brand Trust (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001); Brand Aversion (Park et al., 2013); Dissatisfaction, Brand Rage (Weitzl et al., 2024); Repulsion, Disgust, Anger, Fear, Contempt (Sternberg, 2003); Brand Hate, Aversion (Johnson et al., 2011); Disappointment, Sadness, Despair (Cottingham, 2012); Disappointment, Anger (Madrigal, 2008)

Source: Author’s own compilation

According to Wakefield and Sloan (1995), because of identity formation, fans continue to attend matches and express their support even when their team performs poorly during a season. Boyle and Magnusson (2007) argue that the visual and experiential characteristics provided through team brand management serve to differentiate teams and facilitate identification.

The thematic classification of emotions contributes to understanding the psychological processing of sport consumption experiences. In the context of sport fandom, identification emerges through fans' motivations and their sense of belonging to a group or identity (Bodet, 2011). Heere et al. (2011) suggest that team identification may be influenced by and reinforce fans' geographical identification, as professional and collegiate teams often function as symbols of their associated communities.

Boyle and Magnusson (2007) further note that geographically based strategies aim to communicate to residents that the team belongs to them, even if they do not reside in the city where the team plays. According to Funk and James (2001), team identification may involve both fans' connections with other team members and their psychological identification with the team itself. Gwinner and Swanson (2003) argue that identification can enhance self-esteem, particularly when the community is perceived as prestigious. Wann (2006) defines sport team identification as reflecting the extent to which individuals consider themselves fans, participate in team-related activities, engage with team performance, and perceive the team as a representation of themselves. Several studies highlight the presence of "us versus them" mentalities and in-group/out-group categorizations in sport fandom (Harasta, 2021).

Fans often perceive the product, such as a team, as an extension of themselves. Gwinner and Swanson (2003) describe team support as a form of self-extension and social communication. For fans, team success may be equivalent to personal success, while team failure may be experienced as personal failure (Cialdini et al., 1976). Couvelaere and Richelieu (2005), however, emphasize that teams must achieve at least minimal on-field success, as it is difficult for fans to connect with consistently losing teams. Wear et al. (2018) argue that strategic and effective management of team brands and brand equity is an integral component of fostering identification and building fan communities. In this process, sports marketing plays a key role and bears significant responsibility.

Földesiné's (1990) research provides essential historical context for this dissertation, particularly regarding fan motivation. Her findings indicate that, at the time of the study, the audience of Hungarian football primarily consisted of men of lower social status. The conclusion that many people love football but not the way it is organized directly relates to the emotional alienation and distorted relationships with club brands examined in this dissertation. This research, conducted more than 30 years ago, confirms that fan loyalty has long been a persistent challenge in the Hungarian sports market.

Attitudes toward live football attendance in Hungary were later examined by Kassay (2018). His findings suggest that the promise of victory alone is insufficient motivation for fans; instead, struggle, emotional engagement, and experiential value are more critical. These results reinforce the view that fan loyalty is not solely behavioral but is also grounded in emotional and psychological factors, directly linking to the fan alienation model explored in this dissertation. The study also calls for a redefinition of “success,” which aligns with the dissertation’s objective of presenting a deeper, non-result-oriented approach to attachment to sports brands.

The differentiation of fan motivations in Hungarian football is further supported by the empirical study of Balogh and Bácsné Bába (2024). Their analysis of attitudes and loyalty among fans of NB I football clubs reveals that fan loyalty is driven by diverse motivational patterns that may vary significantly across clubs. This research framework aligns well with the dimensions of emotional attachment and alienation examined in this dissertation and underscores the complexity of fan behavior in the Hungarian sport consumer market.

II.2.2 An Identity-Based Marketing Approach in Sport

In the field of sport, the findings of identity-based marketing are significant, as the interrelationships between social identity and brand management are especially evident. Fans perceive teams, traditional communities, home venues, and other brand attributes as unique combinations that distinguish them from those of competing teams. In their study on the components of team identification, Delia and James (2018) identified three key elements of team meaning: the venue of sporting events, and the team’s past and present.

Dimmock et al. (2005) argue that team identification represents a form of voluntary psychological group membership, suggesting that the cognitive and affective dimensions of identification are likely to be strongly interrelated. They also highlight differences among levels of psychological attachment to sport or teams, which facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of fans’ relationships with clubs. Madrigal (1995) emphasizes that cognitive and affective factors play essential roles in sport consumer satisfaction and match attendance, with the emotional dimension being particularly closely related to fans’ attachment to their teams. According to Heere and James (2007), a primary driver of team identification is the symbolic power of sports teams to represent social identities, such as cities, states, or nationalities.

Charleston (2009) suggests that favorite stadiums embody meanings similar to those associated with the concept of home and identifies three key elements of identity: attachment to geographic location, the overall quality of facilities, and the importance of social interactions. Underwood et al. (2001) argue that the utilization of physical facilities and the extent of fans' social identification depend on how well venues are integrated into organizational brand identity and on the degree to which their attributes facilitate the development of group identity.

According to Gwinner and Swanson (2003), fans who maintain strong and emotionally deep relationships with their teams tend to be highly loyal, regard the team as a central component of their identity, and interpret team successes and failures as personal achievements and setbacks. Similarly, fans who find their favorite teams attractive demonstrate greater commitment (Jaberi et al., 2014). Several studies have identified a relationship between identification and satisfaction among fans (Matsuoka et al., 2003; Kerr & Wijeratne, 2021; Rapp et al., 2019). Woratschek et al. (2020) suggest that team identification, both directly and indirectly, fosters loyalty by enhancing fans' perceptions of team performance and stadium atmosphere. Lam (2012) links the examination of internal and external stakeholders' identification to the field of identity-motivated marketing relationships, which continues to present numerous research opportunities, particularly in exploring the relationship between sports brands and fan communities. One such avenue involves analyzing the identification process itself, as identification plays a crucial role in shaping attachment between fans and clubs.

However, due to the inherent unpredictability of sport, even well-developed plans and expectations may fail to materialize. Rapid, unexpected events can alter fans' emotions within moments, transforming satisfaction into dissatisfaction or vice versa. In this context, Dos Santos et al. (2019) note that unmet expectations may lead to negative emotions that directly influence spectator satisfaction. Wann and Branscombe (1992) further demonstrate that fans who strongly identify with sports brands are more actively involved in fan communities, which increases the likelihood of match attendance.

II.2.3 Fan Loyalty Associated with Sports Teams

Brand loyalty can be defined in multiple ways. In later sections of this dissertation, behavioral and attitudinal dimensions are discussed in greater detail. Many researchers conceptualize consumer brand loyalty as the repeated purchase of a particular brand (Aksoy, 2013; Bauer et al., 2008; Ghodeswar, 2008; Ishak, 2013), which is especially important in sport due to emotional attachment, for example, in relation to ticket purchases, season passes, merchandise, and online streaming services.

Aaker (1992) defines brand loyalty as the degree of a consumer's attachment to a brand. Heere and Dickson (2008) argue that distinguishing between commitment and loyalty is an essential issue in sport marketing research. They conclude that commitment can primarily be interpreted as a cross-sectional construct reflecting individual characteristics, whereas loyalty is longitudinal in nature and can be assessed through long-term comparison.

Loyal consumers are more likely to follow sports brands live at matches or through media channels (Armstrong, 2002a), purchase more products (Branscombe & Wann, 1992), and evaluate sponsors more positively (Filo et al., 2010). Loyalty emerges through a process in which individuals develop stronger emotional responses toward sports teams, making them more valuable to teams and leagues than less loyal consumers. Hunt et al. (1999) associate team loyalty primarily with fans who strongly identify with their teams.

Loyal fans support their teams regardless of circumstances and tend to engage in supportive behaviors that generate economic value, as loyalty encourages repeated consumption of club-related products and services. As a result, sports organizations increasingly strive to establish meaningful and long-term relationships with fans (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Identification, commitment, and attachment contribute to loyalty development through psychological processes. Yoshida et al. (2015) confirm that attachment to fan communities is a key determinant of fan loyalty.

Newson et al. (2016) suggest that group events associated with football matches shape personal identity and the relationship between individual and social identity, indicating that identity fusion provides a novel explanation for group loyalty. Loyal fans exhibit a strong psychological attachment to their teams regardless of team performance and actively support their teams through attendance and merchandise purchases, thereby generating revenue (Wang et al., 2011). Gustafsson et al. (2005) argue that stronger brand loyalty can be achieved through the development of close relationships and direct interactions, a finding reinforced by Adinehfar and Gayem (2016), who demonstrate the positive impact of brand personality on loyalty.

Martín et al. (2020) examined the dimensions of brand loyalty and found that it is primarily associated with passion, attachment, intrinsic rewards, emotional bonding, reflection, and frequent usage. Holzmüller et al. (2014) analyzed brand roles and fan loyalty in parallel, concluding that team brands play a fundamental role in establishing stable and loyal fan bases. Recent studies indicate that both cognitive and emotional dimensions of consumer–firm identification influence key outcomes such as loyalty (Wolter & Cronin, 2017). Kunkel et al. (2016) define fan loyalty as a strong bond with sports brands that integrates core aspects of personal identity, including home, relationships, habits, intrinsic motivation, cultural context, interests, values, life history, and traditions.

Bee and Havitz (2010) identify resistance to change as a significant component of loyalty, reflecting fan commitment. This attachment is substantial for sports brands during crises, performance fluctuations, or organizational changes, as it helps sustain fans bases and contributes to long-term club stability. Differences among fan groups also affect loyalty. Quick (2000) identified five segments of sports spectators based on their relationships with sports organizations. The first group consists of spectators motivated primarily by the event itself rather than team loyalty.

The second group includes casual fans seeking entertainment and enjoyment from close contests. The third group comprises highly identified fans who strongly associate team successes and failures. The fourth group consists of fans demonstrating strong loyalty, while the fifth includes individuals who rarely attend matches, are relatively withdrawn, yet strongly identify with the team. Identification and loyalty do not necessarily influence passion and attendance in the same way, as fans may also engage with sports brands through media such as television, radio, newspapers, and magazines.

Differences among fan groups are further reflected in Hardyns et al.'s (2022) findings on integrity dimensions, which indicate varying perceptions of integrity-related issues. While average fans tend to be more tolerant, loyal fans may experience significant disillusionment when such problems arise.

In sport marketing, it is essential to distinguish between behavioral and attitudinal loyalty. Wilkie (1994) defines brand loyalty as the presence of both behavioral and attitudinal commitment. Attitudinal loyalty has received substantial attention in sport marketing research (Biscaia et al., 2013; Doyle et al., 2013; Filo et al., 2008; Funk & Pastore, 2000; Gladden & Funk, 2002; Heere & Dickson, 2008; Kaynak et al., 2008; Kunkel et al., 2016; Mahony et al., 2000; Neale & Funk, 2006; Wang et al., 2011).

Unlike behavioral loyalty, attitudinal loyalty depends on psychological processes, including commitment and preference toward the team (Bauer et al., 2008; Kaynak et al., 2008). It reflects strong positive attitudes that indicate preferences or intentions to repurchase, whereas behavioral loyalty represents repeated patronage over time (Chen et al., 2009).

According to Gladden and Funk (2002), attitudes reflect how individuals perceive psychological meaning and value. Favorable attitudes toward teams lead to regular and increased consumption (Funk et al., 2000; Mahony et al., 2000). Attitudinal loyalty refers to an emotional attachment to a brand and may promote behavioral loyalty (Funk & Pastore, 2000; Havitz & Howard, 1995). It also contributes to the development of actual consumption behavior, such as increased match attendance.

2. Table: Dimensions of Sport Consumer Loyalty

Topic	Characteristics	Source
ATTITUDINAL LOYALTY	Emotional Attachment, Identification with the Club, Positive Perceptions, and Support for Brand Image	Doyle et al. (2013)
		Funk és Pastore (2000)
		Gladden és Funk (2002)
		Filo és Funk (2008)
		Kunkel et al. (2016)
		Neale és Funk (2006)
		Wang et al. (2011)
		Mahony et al. (2000)
		Heere és Dickson (2008)
		Kaynak et al. (2007)
		Biscaia et al. (2012, 2013)
BEHAVIORAL LOYALTY	Behavioral Manifestations: Match Attendance, Television Viewing, Purchasing, and Engagement	Gladden és Funk (2002)
		Bauer et al. (2008)
		Kwon és Armstrong (2002)
		Baldinger és Rubinson (1996)
		Heere és James (2007)

Source: Author's own compilation

James et al. (2002) define loyal sport consumers as individuals who remain with their teams over extended periods. In sport contexts, attitudinal loyalty is interpreted as continuity of attachment (Filo et al., 2008).

However, Kunkel et al. (2016) emphasize that internal characteristics such as fan culture and motivational patterns are susceptible to influence. Variables shaping personal and brand identity, including players, coaches, logos, and colors, significantly affect loyalty, making continuous monitoring of fan sentiments essential.

Accordingly, brand management and the strategic development of brand identity elements, such as names, logos, color schemes, and uniforms, are crucial. This approach may conflict with tradition-oriented fan attitudes that resist changes to crests and symbolic elements associated with attachment.

In addition to attitudinal loyalty, behavioral loyalty must also be considered. Milne and McDonald (1999) conceptualize behavioral loyalty as involvement with a team, measured by media following and frequency of purchasing or using branded products. Bristow and Sebastian (2001), studying Chicago Cubs fans, found that childhood exposure to games, through attendance or media, was associated with a stronger emotional attachment in adulthood.

Bauer et al. (2008) used the frequency of season ticket purchases as an indicator of behavioral loyalty, arguing that it is often associated with strong attitudinal attachment to a team. However, they also noted that attendance may sometimes result from being offered a season ticket rather than from genuine loyalty. Similarly, Kwon and Armstrong (2002) linked loyalty to match attendance, suggesting that participation in games is the most critical variable revealing behavioral loyalty. Baldinger and Rubinson (1996) examined behavioral loyalty from an individual perspective. They emphasized that, in addition to behavioral indicators, favorable brand attitudes should also be considered, as they reflect commitment to the brand.

Gladden and Funk (2002) explain consumer loyalty through the development of strong geographical and/or social ties and measure behavioral loyalty using three indicators: the number of matches attended, the frequency of following the team through media, and overall participation in team-related activities. In loyalty research, local patriotism emerges as a factor that can provide sports teams with a significant competitive advantage. The emotional foundations of local attachment stem from individuals' pride in their hometowns, with sports teams often serving as symbolic representations of this pride.

This form of identity-based identification not only strengthens match attendance and loyalty to the club but also enables the expression of local values through the team. In the long term, this contributes to social embeddedness, enhanced brand equity, local brand positioning, and economic stability.

One of the main challenges in loyalty research concerns the conceptualization and measurement of brand loyalty (Filo & Funk, 2008). Measurement efforts are facilitated by the significant impact of brand identity on loyalty (Hosseini et al., 2017). Brand loyalty is a core component of brand equity (Karjaluoto et al., 2016; Stevens & Rosenberg, 2012), as individuals who strongly identify with sports organizations are more likely to seek brand-related information, thereby strengthening brand associations (Keller & Aaker, 1998).

Dehdashti et al. (2012) argue that strong brands facilitate the development of long-term relationships between consumers and organizations, influencing satisfaction and brand trust (Bloemer & Kasper, 1995). Through strong branding, teams can cultivate fan loyalty and generate additional revenue through product and service sales (Burton & Howard, 1999; Gustafson, 2001; Mullin et al., 2000). Bee and Havitz (2010) suggest that sports organizations can develop strategies to enhance fan loyalty and increase attendance, ultimately leading to greater financial success and stronger community engagement.

According to Kotler and Keller (2003), consumer loyalty provides both economic and non-economic benefits, as acquiring new customers is generally more costly than retaining existing ones. Loyal customers drive higher profitability and, through positive word of mouth, strengthen organizational reputation and market position. In sport, this is particularly important, as new teams face substantial challenges in attracting spectators and building long-term fan bases. Addressing these challenges requires the strategic application of sports marketing tools that foster emotional attachment and community experiences, thereby supporting sustainable loyalty.

Compared to established competitors, new teams lack an existing consumer base and must position their products and services without relying on historical success to attract fans (Funk et al., 2002; Grant et al., 2011). Grant et al. (2011) further argue that new teams may fail to generate sufficient revenue if their performance does not meet the high expectations of local communities.

II.3 Fans as Consumers

According to Cornwell and Jahn (2023), fans are consumers of sport; however, not all sport consumers consider themselves fans. This distinction lies in differing levels of identification, which influence consumer behavior and commitment. These differences also affect fans' intentions to attend matches.

II.3.1 Fan Identity and Fandom

In general, fans represent significant value for sport and individual sports disciplines, as they are essential actors in ensuring the sustainability of sports enterprises. Commitment associated with fandom is reflected in the dedication and often indefinable attraction that fans feel toward their favorite teams (Duarte et al., 2017). Sport consumers can engage with their favorite teams not only at event venues but also through media broadcasts at home or in communal spaces (Kajos et al., 2017).

Although fans' time and financial investment in sport and teams have increased substantially in recent years, it is essential to recognize that not everyone who watches or attends sporting events is genuinely attached to a club or is committed (Mahony et al., 2000). In this regard, Lock and Filo (2012) emphasize that for new or developing sports enterprises, building consumer communities and fan bases and establishing meaningful relationships with potential fans are critical tasks. Zillmann and Paulus (1993) argue that fans differ from spectators in that they form implicit alliances and perceive themselves as members of a group (Boyle & Magnusson, 2007). Consequently, community identity and group cohesion may strengthen loyalty.

Rose et al. (2016) highlight the importance of fan activity by suggesting that fans, as members of brand communities, seek to protect traditions associated with team history and heritage, viewing themselves as guardians of brand legacy. The significance of fan communities is further illustrated by Wann's (1995) finding that one of the primary motivations for match attendance is escape from daily routines and concerns. According to Burton and Hyatt (2022), although fans are organized around professional sports organizations, the resulting relationships are fundamentally fan-oriented and based on team-related identities and fans ideologies (Lock & Heere, 2017). The future of sport is therefore sustained by fan interest, collective engagement, and community formation.

In contemporary sports services, fans occupy a central position in organizational strategies, as they are simultaneously consumers and financial fans. Accordingly, fan relations, service quality, community needs, and engagement management are prioritized. Blumrodt (2017) argues that understanding fan behavior is grounded in consumer attitudes, which reflect overall brand evaluations and perceptions of clubs. Fans experiencing psychological dependence may function as reference consumers, perceiving themselves as such. As Dénes (1998) notes, spectator sport cannot exist without fans and audiences. Fans act simultaneously as consumers, participants, and influencers of the sporting spectacle.

They may engage through multiple channels: (1) in-person attendance at stadiums and arenas, (2) media consumption via television, radio, and the internet, and (3) participation in online and offline discourse through comments, reports, and summaries (Gladden et al., 2002).

Consequently, sports enterprises are tasked with directing new audiences, young people, and culturally mobile leisure groups toward existing fan communities, strengthening their attachment to teams and integrating them into stable, value-creating fans bases. This process provides the economic foundation of sports organizations. Salari (2023) further emphasizes that building relationships with fans is a strategic priority, identifying audience attraction and engagement development as core elements of the sports industry.

Beyond revenue diversification, effective fan engagement contributes to long-term social embeddedness and sustained brand equity. In addition to physical presence, social media offers essential tools for maintaining fan–team relationships. These platforms enable fans to interact with clubs and express critical opinions (Jones, 2000), while also providing organizations with valuable insights into fan motivations and helping them strengthen relationships (Stavros et al., 2014). Gwinner and Swanson (2003) argue that digital platforms enhance public access to teams through personal communication devices. Wakefield and Sloan (1995) note that retaining existing fans is easier than integrating new fans, which remains both a significant opportunity and a considerable challenge.

Sanahuja-Peris and Ginesta (2024), examining the Premier League and La Liga, analyzed fan–club dialogue, levels of fan influence, and communication dynamics. Despite variations in the effects of social media participation, their findings reveal strong fan demand for transparency and clubs’ efforts to enhance engagement through digital channels. The development of fan loyalty represents a crucial stage in fan–team relationships and is essential for organizational continuity.

Armstrong (2002) and Funk et al. (2004) argue that fan participation is valuable for understanding sport consumer attitudes and behaviors. Dénes (1998) highlights the unique and engaging nature of matches as a driver of spectator interest and demand. Managers, therefore, seek solutions that generate revenue and support economic and sporting objectives (Keshtidar, 2018). Bee and Havitz (2010) emphasize that understanding fan participation and behavioral loyalty is vital for organizations aiming to increase attendance and retention.

Kocsis (2021) outlines a “success cycle” strategy in which sporting performance generates revenue that can be reinvested in higher-quality players, reinforcing competitiveness.

Zhang (2024) argues that fans contribute to financial stability through merchandise purchases, ticket sales, and personal support, making them central to team success. Becker and Daschmann (2023) similarly note that fans' lower price sensitivity and loyalty are essential for economic sustainability.

Fan loyalty and passion constitute major drivers of sustained success. According to Gladden and Funk (2002), from a fan perspective, presence and participation are vital to team success, strengthening social identity, community cohesion, and attachment. At this stage, fans perceive themselves as more than passive spectators: they view their involvement as meaningful participation in something larger than themselves. In extreme cases, such fans may perceive themselves as quasi-members of the team.

II.3.2 The Relationship Between Fans, Sports Teams, and Clubs

Research conducted in sport-related contexts has extensively examined fans' attachment to sports teams, particularly in relation to match attendance driven by positive emotions (Wolter & Cronin, 2017), the psychology of fan communities (Grant et al., 2011; Boyle & Magnusson, 2007), sport brands (Biscaia et al., 2016; Bodet & Bernache-Assollant, 2011; Brand et al., 2023; Gladden & Funk, 2002; Kim et al., 2019; Kunkel et al., 2016), the effects of commitment, loyalty, and psychological characteristics on personality (Dehdashti et al., 2012; Funk et al., 2004), brand communities (Underwood et al., 2001), consumer and fan identification (Aaker, 1992; Boyle & Magnusson, 2007; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Madrigal, 1995; Wann, 2006), identity (Blumrodt & Huang-Horowitz, 2017), and fan satisfaction (Hosseini et al., 2017).

Within the sport marketing and consumer behavior literature, numerous studies examine team–fan relationships, the development and maintenance of loyalty, and the psychological processing of fandom (Burton & Hyatt, 2022). According to Couvelaere and Richelieu (2005), sports teams elicit stronger emotional responses from fans than those observed in other industries, partly because sporting experiences are often shared with others.

Spectator sports can foster a sense of belonging in increasingly individualized societies through shared symbols, collective identity, and solidarity (Gladden et al., 1998). Fans' emotional attachment to a club or identity (Lock & Heere, 2017), as well as commitment to the experience, is often expressed through habitual behaviors that shape long-term attendance intentions and the depth of team identification.

Attachment is significant as it represents a stage preceding the development of fan loyalty. Fans initially engage as independent individuals and, ideally, experience emotional fulfillment through supporting a team or athlete. Fandom may serve as an essential psychological component or compensatory mechanism in their lives (Harasta, 2021). As emotional bonds intensify, fans seek like-minded individuals with whom to share their experiences. Individual attachment thus connects to identity-based communities, fostering collective relationships and shared fan experiences. Thomson et al. (2005) emphasize the importance of emotion and satisfaction in consumer attachment.

For fans, connection is not limited to their own or fellow fans' identification with the team and its values. It is also important that players, coaches, and management appropriately represent both the club's interests and its underlying values, which often originate from the community's value system (Heere & James, 2007). James et al. (2002) argue that fans develop psychological relationships with teams, which manifest in consistent, enduring behaviors.

Loyal fans display strong psychological attachment regardless of team performance and support their teams through purchasing merchandise and attending matches, thereby generating revenue (Wang et al., 2011). Murrell and Dietz (1992) note that fans often extend their personal self-esteem through identification with their teams. Accordingly, a deeper understanding of fan–team relationships is essential for interpreting loyalty and attendance patterns.

Fan-based evaluations of clubs significantly contribute to building partnerships between fans and organizations and reflect fans' cognitive and emotional orientations (Kolyperas et al., 2019). Club perception is also expressed through attendance levels and crowd presence (Edensor, 2015). Research on identification remains central to understanding loyalty and psychological engagement in team–fan relationships (Burton & Hyatt, 2022).

The Psychological Continuum Model (PCM; Funk & James, 2001) provides a useful framework for understanding fan–team relationships. The model integrates earlier research on sport consumption and conceptualizes psychological attachment as a developmental process. It distinguishes among different levels of connection, facilitating a comprehensive interpretation of individuals' relationships with sport. The PCM describes four stages: awareness, attraction, attachment, and allegiance. At the awareness stage, individuals recognize sports or teams but have no clear preference. During attraction, they develop an interest in a particular team or sport. At the attachment stage, psychological connections emerge, creating associations between individuals and teams.

Finally, at the allegiance stage, individuals become loyal and committed fans, influencing their behavior. The PCM has had a significant impact on subsequent sport marketing research (Alexandris et al., 2017; Casper & Jeon, 2018; de Groot & Robinson, 2008; Filo et al., 2010).

Fan identity includes affiliation with sports organizations (Lock & Heere, 2017), evaluations of clubs, and identification with principles, symbols, and rituals. Positive experiences related to attachment and community involvement foster satisfaction, which enhances attendance motivation (Kim & Mao, 2021).

Fan motivation originates from multiple sources. Correia and Esteves (2007) examined live attendance motivation through surveys conducted at major finals. Trail and James (2001) used the Motivation Scale for Sport Consumption (MSSC) to identify 27 motivational dimensions, including achievement, knowledge, aesthetics, drama, escape, family, physical attraction, physical skill, and social interaction. Understanding these factors enables organizations to tailor services and communication to different fan segments.

Motivational awareness is essential for increasing loyalty, enhancing attendance intentions, and developing fan experiences. Kajos et al. (2017) reviewed several motivation scales and, based on the international SPEED scale (Socialization, Performance, Excitement, Esteem, Diversion), developed the Hungarian SPEEDE-H scale. This instrument measures social, performance-related, esteem, excitement-seeking, escape, and aesthetic motivations.

Kim and Trail (2010) adopt a nuanced perspective by distinguishing between motivators and constraints. Some factors may function as either, depending on context. For example, team victories may motivate attendance, while defeats may discourage it (Kim & Mao, 2021). Kassay's (2012) research, closely related to the present dissertation, indicates that intergenerational fan commitment in Hungary has weakened and that club brand equity has limited capacity to activate community attachment.

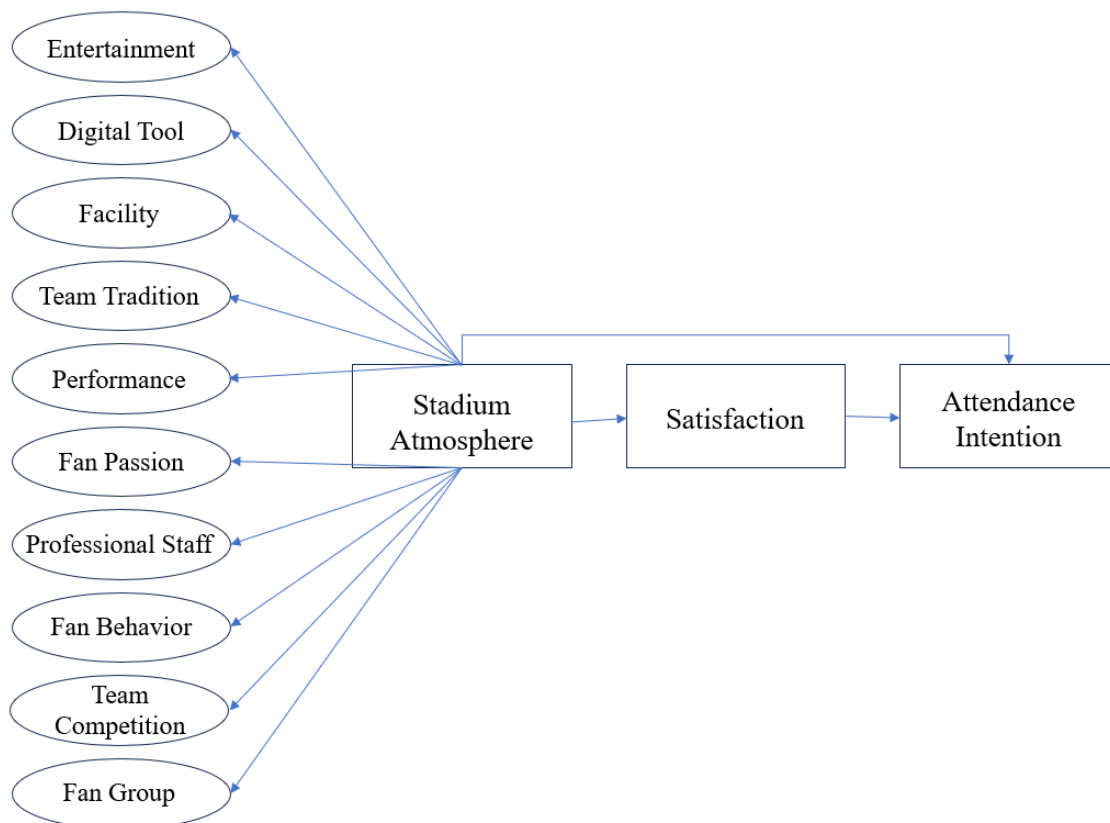
These findings directly relate to the dimensions of alienation and emotional loyalty examined in this dissertation and confirm the relevance of the identified research gap. The specific characteristics of the Hungarian sports market—particularly competitive entertainment environments and weak brand embeddedness—further underscore the practical relevance of the proposed theoretical model.

II.3.3 Fan Satisfaction

Multidimensional economic interests increasingly influence the operations of sports organizations (Desbordes, 2012; Mason, 1999). According to Bühler et al. (2007), consumer commitment, satisfaction, and cooperation are positive determinants of business relationships. Similarly, Anderson et al. (2004) identified a positive relationship between consumer satisfaction and organizational value. These findings highlight the importance of paying special attention to fan satisfaction and conducting research to improve it.

This also implies that attendance figures are not merely economic indicators but are fundamental determinants of fan experience and match attractiveness. In their assessment of stadium atmosphere, Chen et al. (2013) consider perceived crowd size, the perceived intensity of spectator support, and the perceived level of fan passion (4. Figure).

4. Figure: Model of the Relationships Between Stadium Atmosphere, Satisfaction, and Attendance Intention



Source: Author's own compilation based on Chen et al. (2013)

Satisfaction measures consumers' responses to consumption, while consumption itself precedes evaluation (i.e., satisfaction), which includes commitment to the brand (Maslowska et al., 2016). This relationship is also observable in the field of sport.

Consumer satisfaction is based on individual evaluations of how satisfied consumers are with the products or services they receive (Bitner & Hubbert, 1994).

The relevance of research on attendance is further demonstrated by Chen et al.'s (2013) finding that stadium atmosphere is a key component related to fan presence and activity. Motivation to attend matches is closely linked to fan satisfaction. According to Park (2016), satisfaction derived from sport event experiences, emotional responses, and overall event organization significantly shape fans' future attendance intentions. Škorić et al. (2021) similarly emphasize that fan satisfaction and intentions to revisit matches are associated with the quality of event delivery and overall experience.

Clemes et al. (2011) present a comprehensive model of the sport experience by illustrating the relationship between fan satisfaction and service quality, which serves as a particularly important reference for the issues discussed in this dissertation (5. Figure).

5. Figure: Conceptual Model of the Professional Sport Experience

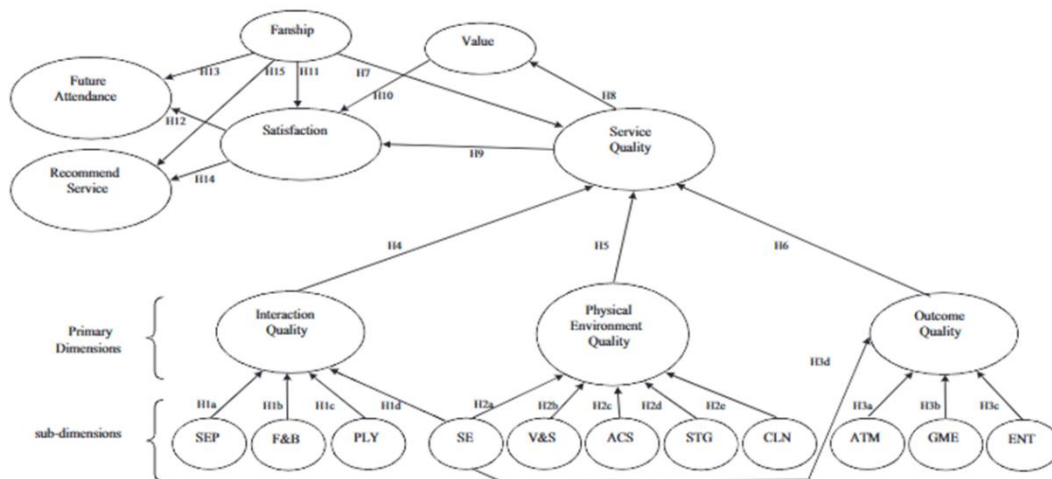


Fig. 1. A conceptual model of the professional sport experience. Sub-dimensions: SEP, security employee performance; F&B, food and beverage service; PLY, player interaction with spectators; SE, social environment; V&S, visuals and sound; ACS, stadium access; STG, seating; CLN, stadium cleanliness and design; ATM, atmosphere; GME, game quality; ENT, match day entertainment.

Source: based on Clemes et al. (2011)

The model of Clemes et al. (2011) examines the relationship between the quality factors of the sport consumer experience and behavioral intentions, with particular attention to the mediating role of satisfaction. The variables included in the model—perceived service quality, subjective evaluation of value for money, emotions experienced during the event, overall satisfaction, and future behavioral intentions—form an interconnected system. Perceived quality directly affects emotions, perceived value, and satisfaction, while satisfaction is the most important predictor of behavioral intentions.

According to Santos et al. (2019), emotional impact plays a key role in shaping satisfaction, influencing future intentions to attend matches. They also emphasize the importance of managing fans' emotions before and during events, which can increase fans satisfaction and thereby raise the likelihood of repeat attendance. In relation to strengthening match-related satisfaction, Revindo et al. (2023) highlight the importance of positive word of mouth, which can further encourage fans' future attendance intentions. The research conducted by Caro and García (2007) focused on the emotional and cognitive factors underlying consumer satisfaction with sports events. Their results indicate that cognitive factors play an essential role in shaping satisfaction and influencing future match attendance intentions.

Thus, the relationships shown in Figure 5 are not merely static connections, but dynamic chains of influence that demonstrate how the experience of a sports event can develop into long-term brand loyalty. Interpreting this model is particularly important from a sports marketing perspective, as it shows that improving the quality of the consumer experience directly affects fan engagement and the likelihood of return.

A comprehensive understanding of the approaches that influence fan satisfaction must be grounded in knowledge of the factors that affect satisfaction. According to Sarstedt et al. (2014), the measurement of fan satisfaction at sports events (FANSAT) indicates a strong relationship between match attendance and fan satisfaction. The most critical components of this relationship are the stadium, club management, the club's relationship with fans, and the wide range of experience and services associated with sports events. Therefore, it is essential for sports organizations to regularly measure fan satisfaction using structured methodologies and incorporate the results into strategic decision-making. All of this highlights that increasing fan satisfaction is a complex, multidimensional task that ranges from physical infrastructure and communication strategies to the conscious shaping of community experiences. According to Matsuoka et al. (2003), fan satisfaction is an indicator of future match attendance, with particular importance placed on satisfaction with the favorite team's performance and the excellence of the match experience.

Similarly, Shonk and Chelladurai (2008) emphasize the importance of fan satisfaction in their research, identifying a strong relationship with intentions to return to matches. Van Leeuwen et al.'s (2002) Sport Spectator Satisfaction Model suggests that match events, match-day services, and especially wins and losses have a significant impact on fan satisfaction. Larson and Steinman (2009) also highlight the importance of service quality, concluding that it is a key factor in influencing fan satisfaction and intentions to return.

II.4 The Presence of Detachment in Sport

The phenomenon of alienation in sport can be understood as a complex social and psychological process, manifested in the weakening of relationships between fans and clubs and the erosion of shared identity. This may be caused by a prolonged decline in team performance, loss of trust in managerial decisions, the increasing commercialization of sport, or the emergence of organizational values that conflict with fans' expectations.

Alienation in sport can be understood not only at a psychological or sociological level, but also from a sports marketing perspective, particularly in terms of consumer experience, brand relationships, and loyalty. Modern sports events are often overly technologized, commercially saturated, or characterized by a loss of identity. These factors may contribute to fans' inability to identify with the brand, feel part of the community, or experience authentic emotional attachment.

The primary goal of sports marketing is therefore to reduce this alienation by developing brand strategies that foster emotional engagement, community experience, and authentic connections between sports consumers and clubs, events, or sports brands.

Signs of alienation may include, for example:

- Declining match attendance despite team success
- Negative emotional reactions to commercial decisions (e.g., sponsorship changes, stadium naming rights)
- Weakening community identity, when fans do not feel represented
- Digital overload, whereby sports experience loses its physical and emotional immediacy

Thus, sports marketing is not merely a promotional tool but can also function as a strategy of emotional reconstruction, helping to rebuild the relationship between alienated fans and sports brands. Such tools may include authentic storytelling, fan involvement in decision-making, emphasizing local identity, and CSR initiatives (Kolyperas et al., 2018; Mastromartino & Zhang, 2020; Vale & Fernandes, 2018).

Alienation may also manifest in declining fan numbers and viewership, reduced community activity, weakened fan loyalty, and falling revenues. In the long term, this can threaten a club's economic sustainability and social embeddedness.

Examining this process is particularly important for sports brand management and the development of fan relationships, as timely intervention can help restore connections, strengthen loyalty, and rebuild community identity.

In the long run, alienation negatively affects not only revenues (e.g., ticket sales and merchandising) but also sponsorship income and the value of club-owned rights, and jeopardizes social embeddedness and brand equity. These processes can place a club on a negative trajectory, which may also impact sporting performance. Therefore, the study of alienation is of key importance in the strategic planning of sports brand management and fan relations, as early recognition and intervention enable the restoration of relationships, the reinforcement of loyalty, and the rebuilding of shared identity.

II.4.1 Components of Fan Disengagement

In relation to the concept of consumer disidentification, Becker and Tausch (2014) distinguish three basic components: detachment, dissatisfaction, and perceived difference. Examining consumer–brand alienation, Anaza et al. (2021) concluded that alienation is closely linked to negative consumer emotions, highlighting anger, frustration, hatred, disgust, contempt, and aversion as key factors. Similarly, in the study by Prayag et al. (2020), anger and sadness appear among negative emotions that can directly influence fans’ attitudes and behavior.

Although Newson et al. (2023) found that negative experiences—such as a team’s prolonged lack of success—can paradoxically strengthen fan engagement in some cases, persistent or recurring negative experiences increase the risk of disengagement and may foster alienation from the team or club. In addition to emotional factors, changes in fan community dynamics, declining trust between club management and fans, and the erosion of shared identity can also contribute to alienation. Fan disengagement is therefore not only an individual phenomenon but also a collective one, affecting a club’s social embeddedness, economic stability, and long-term sustainability.

A key difference between general product or service consumption and sports consumption is that while consumers may completely abandon an ordinary product, fan attachment can be so strong that a level of connection persists even in the face of dissatisfaction. Smith et al. (1981) examined whether fans could imagine circumstances under which their interest in sport might decline.

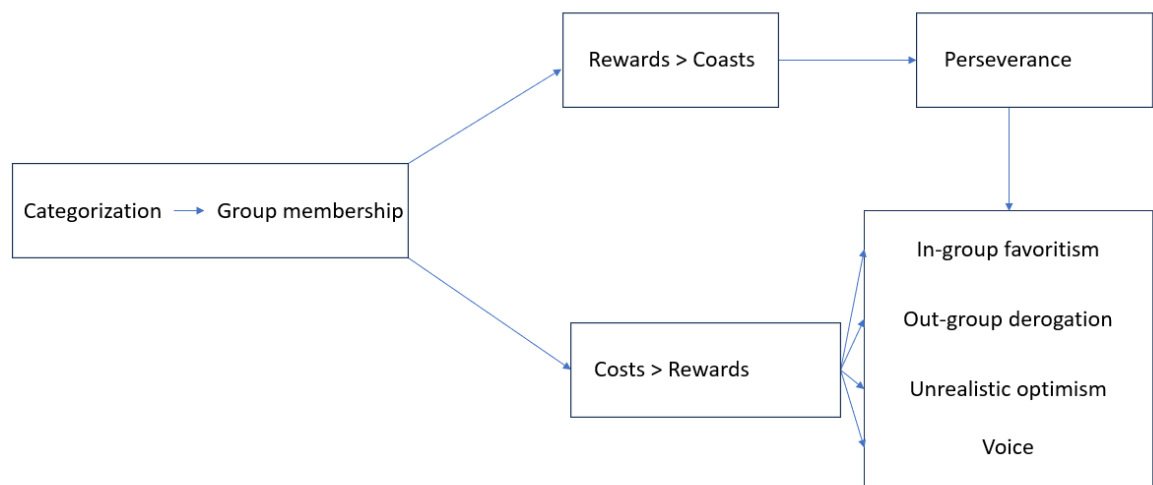
A significant proportion of respondents answered negatively, while those who responded affirmatively mentioned greedy players, legal problems, or substantial changes in family obligations as possible reasons for reduced future interest.

Lee (2019) emphasizes that one of the beauties—and strengths—of sport is that despite frequent complaints about team performance, star players’ characteristics, and stadium services, fans continue to attend matches, team events, and sporting competitions (Kim et al., 2019).

According to Lee, a purely cognitive model would interpret repeated attendance as irrational, considering such negative evaluations of brand attributes. A similar topic was addressed by Jones (2000), who examined issues of belonging within the fan community of an English football club (Luton Town F.C.) from a social identity perspective.

Jones argues that when the “costs” and “benefits” (e.g., match experience) associated with supporting a football team are imbalanced, four compensatory behaviors may help sustain fan involvement: in-group favoritism, out-group derogation, unrealistic optimism, and voice (6. Figure).

6. Figure: Model of Fan Engagement



Source: Author’s own compilation based on Jones (2000)

In-group favoritism refers to a preferential attitude toward fellow group members and is a frequently mentioned characteristic of group belonging. In the context of fan communities, this can be particularly important, as Yoshida et al. (2015) also found that belonging to a fan community is one of the strongest predictors of match attendance frequency.

Out-group derogation, or the devaluation of those outside the fan community, can be regarded as a form of self-enhancement and is related to the tendency of in-group members to attribute “special” characteristics to their own group. Unrealistic optimism refers to the tendency of group members to overestimate the potential benefits of group membership in comparison with its “costs” or negative aspects.

According to Jones (2000), voice is associated with compensation through emphasizing the positive aspects of identification. That is, in the case of team underperformance, it refers to highlighting the team's positive attributes.

Previous literature has also addressed the weakening of fan attachment. Wann et al. (1996) found that declining support for a formerly favorite team may be caused by the team's lack of success, the emergence of other commitments, time constraints, the loss of certain players, geographical distance, or friends and peers no longer following the team.

Regarding the complete breakdown of the team–fan bond, Mahony et al. (2000) and Matsuoka et al. (2003) identified conditions under which previously loyal fans abandon identification with their former favorite team. These include declines in team or club value, changes in its identity, transformations in community relationships, financial burdens affecting fans, and changes in personal life circumstances or geographical location (Locke et al., 2011). Scholes (2004) notes that fans of losing teams may experience disappointment with their team within the broader context of disillusionment with sport.

Based on the previously discussed literature, negative fan opinions about the club, brand, and team can significantly impact attachment to both the club and the team. At the same time, negative perceptions and evaluations of the club depend on numerous factors, including the sport's specific characteristics and the teams involved.

II.4.2 The Emotional Background of Alienation

This dissertation examines the characteristics of negative phenomena related to fan attachment to football teams. Over recent decades, the literature focusing on the negative aspects of fan emotions has developed rapidly (Hyatt & Foster, 2015; Kwak et al., 2011; Lee, 2018; Rainey et al., 2011; Scholes, 2004). The starting point of this research is linked to the basic emotions identified by Ekman and Friesen (1971), among which negative emotions are closely related to the topic of fan alienation. Numerous emotions are associated with the formation and dissolution of attachment (the process of alienation).

By studying emotions, it is possible to distinguish different stages of attachment and alienation; therefore, presenting the potential spectrum of emotions is essential for this research. Izard (2009) defined emotions as neurobiological states that motivate human behavior.

Literature distinguishes between basic and secondary emotions, both of which are relevant in sports-related research. Ekman and Friesen (1971), Ekman (1992), Ekman and Cordaro (2011), and Tracy and Randles (2011) discussed basic emotions in detail. Ekman and Cordaro (2011) identified anger, fear, surprise, sadness, disgust, contempt, and happiness as basic emotions. It is important to note that these include both positive and negative emotions.

Based on current findings, there is no consensus regarding the relevance of basic emotions. However, beyond basic emotions, numerous others can be identified. For example, positive emotions include feeling active, alert, attentive, determined, enthusiastic, excited, inspired, interested, proud, and strong, while negative emotions include fear, shame, anxiety, guilt, hostility, irritability, nervousness, fright, and distress. These emotions are included in the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) (Seib-Pfeifer et al., 2017). The validation of the Hungarian version of PANAS (Gyollai et al., 2011) confirms that positive and negative affective states are measurable and appear as independent emotional dimensions. This is directly related to the concepts of emotional attachment and alienation examined in this dissertation and provides a methodological basis for their study, as numerous emotions from this spectrum are likely to emerge during both attachment formation and alienation.

According to Huang (2001), the marketing approach to emotion theory differs significantly from general psychological approaches. In marketing, emotions tend to be less intense, making strict distinctions between emotions, feelings, and moods less necessary.

Nevertheless, in identity-based marketing relationships (Lam, 2012), emotions play an important role in analyzing consumer behavior. Burmann et al. (2009) also emphasize the importance of developing identity-based brand equity models. The significance of emotions is particularly evident in sports, as fan behavior is primarily grounded in social identity (Locke et al., 2011; Rees et al., 2015).

Kural and Özbek's (2023) findings indicate that social identity and team loyalty strongly influence sports consumption intentions. Zeelenberg and Pieters (2004) examined how negative emotions such as disappointment and regret affect customer behavior following service failures.

Their results suggest that these emotions directly influence purchasing behavior, beyond general dissatisfaction. They also highlighted that the intensity and duration of negative emotions play a decisive role in whether consumers are willing to reuse a service or permanently turn away from a brand.

Applied to sport, this means that unfavorable match experiences or controversial management decisions may reduce long-term fan loyalty and contribute to alienation.

Yi and Baumgartner (2004) investigated how consumers cope with negative emotions related to purchases, focusing on anger, disappointment, regret, and anxiety. They identified various coping strategies, including problem-solving, confrontational coping, seeking social support, mental and behavioral disengagement, positive reinterpretation, self-control, and acceptance. However, general consumer behavior in response to negative emotions does not necessarily correspond to fan behavior in sport, where positive and negative emotions often coexist. Yim and Byon (2020) argue, based on the goal-directed behavior model, that both positive and negative anticipated emotions influence behavioral intentions toward sport. Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) suggest that brand loyalty can be negatively affected by a loss of trust.

Like positive emotions, negative emotions can strongly influence consumer behavior. However, Einwiller et al. (2006) found that identification levels do not necessarily affect reactions to strongly negative information. Park et al. (2013) introduced the concept of brand dislike, the opposite of brand loyalty, which may indicate distancing from the brand. Grégoire et al. (2009) observed that resentment decreases more slowly among highly attached consumers than among those with weaker attachments. Sayin and Gürhan-Canlı (2024) found that consumers with stronger self-brand connections react more negatively to symbolically incongruent brand behavior. Jain and Sharma (2019) concluded that strong positive attachment may lead to greater resentment and brand hate following negative brand experiences. Weitzl et al. (2024) found that brand shame may mediate the relationship between dissatisfaction and brand anger in cases of symbolic brand failure. Sternberg (2003) identified three components of brand hate: repulsion and disgust, anger and fear, and devaluation through contempt. Johnson et al. (2011) argue that brand hate emerges when consumers develop a strong aversion toward a brand. Disappointment theory (Bell, 1985; Loomes & Sugden, 1986; Rainey et al., 2011) also helps explain negative emotions: individuals form expectations about uncertain outcomes and experience disappointment when outcomes fall short, as in the case of team defeat (Hirt et al., 1992; Kwak et al., 2011; Scholes, 2004).

Lee (2018) argues that sports consumers can develop genuine emotions toward teams based on all aspects of sports experience, not only on-field performance. Considering disappointment theory, individuals may experience disappointment when actual outcomes are worse than expected.

Rainey et al. (2011) describe fan disappointment as an emotion that arises when fans are unpleasantly surprised or when outcomes fail to meet expectations.

Hyatt and Foster (2015) identify unethical behavior as a cause of weakening fan attachment. The relevance of studying negative emotions is also reinforced by the fact that the Psychological Continuum Model (PKM) by Funk and James (2001) focuses solely on positive emotions related to attachment (see Section II.3.2). The PKM became influential for its innovative description of attachment development stages.

In recent decades, marketing has expanded consumer behavior research, partly due to intensified competition, which has encouraged consumers to pay greater attention to brands and make more deliberate decisions, thereby fostering negative emotions as well. Digitalization has further amplified these effects by facilitating access to information.

This makes the present research novel, as it seeks to map detachment, weakening relationships, and unspoken negative emotions, rather than focusing solely on attachment development. These phenomena represent economic opportunities that marketing should address. Given the intensity of fan emotions, this is particularly relevant in sport, where brand attachment is not merely a consumption decision but an identity- and community-based commitment. Consequently, the process of alienation in sport is more complex and has more profound impacts than in most other industries.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The literature review presented in the previous chapter outlined the foundations of fandom, the factors influencing match attendance, and their effects on value creation in sports clubs. The primary research presented in this dissertation examines issues related to fan attachment and the characteristics of fan alienation through the opinions of fans of MOL Fehérvár FC, a traditional provincial stronghold in the Hungarian first-division football championship.

By analyzing fan perspectives, the study explores these phenomena within a specific organizational and cultural context. The presentation of the research findings aims to contribute to the existing body of literature in several areas.

To ensure accurate problem identification and effective solution-seeking, and given the nature of the research, a hybrid methodological approach (Neulinger et al., 2010) was considered appropriate to obtain broad and in-depth information.

Within the qualitative research framework, in-depth interviews were employed as a key methodological approach. When formulating the interview questions, the objective was to obtain evaluable and relevant answers to the research issues previously identified. The responses to the interview questions also simultaneously addressed the related sub-questions. The interview guide is presented in Appendix 1.

Since triangulation is generally an essential element of scientific research, it is important to emphasize that the parallel and mutually reinforcing application of qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis can also be regarded as a form of triangulation. According to Meydan and Akkaş (2024), triangulation is a methodological approach that strengthens the reliability and validity of research findings by using multiple methods and data sources. They also argue that in mixed-methods research, triangulation is particularly beneficial for promoting a holistic understanding of research problems. The simultaneous application of both methodologies supported a comprehensive exploration of the research questions and, in addition to complementing each other effectively, ensured the robustness of the scientific results.

The following chapter presents the qualitative and quantitative methods used to examine the research questions discussed in this dissertation.

III.1 Research Context – Introduction of MOL Fehérvár FC

When interpreting the primary research findings, it is essential to present the research context and introduce MOL Fehérvár FC as the club/team examined in this study in order to understand the current state of the club–fan relationship. This is particularly important because the club’s history includes numerous name changes and changes to its brand elements.

The history of football in Székesfehérvár began with the club’s founding in 1941, and its brand name has changed several times up to the present day (3. Table). Reviewing these name changes is highly important for this research. Agha et al. (2016) identified the negative economic effects of club name changes on fan behavior and loyalty, as the club/team name represents one of the most important brand associations.

3. Table: Name Changes of the Fehérvár Football Club

1941 founded: Vadásztölténygyári SK	1993–1995: Parmalat FC
1942–1944: Székesfehérvári MOVE Vadásztölténygyár Sport és Kultúr Egyesület	1995–1996: Fehérvár-Parmalat FC
1944–1948: Székesfehérvári SE	1996: Fehérvár 96 FC
1948–1950: Székesfehérvári Dolgozók SE	1996–1997: Videoton FC Fehérvár
1950–1962: Székesfehérvári Vasas SK	1997–2005: Videoton FC
1962–1968: Székesfehérvári VT Vasas	2005–2009: FC Fehérvár
1968–1990: Videoton Sport Club	2009–2018. június 30.: Videoton FC
1990–1992: Videoton-Waltham SC	2018. július 1.–2019. június 30.: MOL Vidi FC
1992–1993: Videoton-Waltham FC	2019–2023: MOL Fehérvár FC

Source: The club's official website (<https://vidipedia.hu/klubtortenet>), author's own compilation

The club's history contains numerous interesting elements. The football team first competed in the Hungarian second division in the 1957/58 season. In the context of attachment, identification, and identity examined in this dissertation, the stadium represents an important factor. The Sóstói Stadium was inaugurated on September 20, 1967, during the match between VT Vasas and Rot-Weiss Erfurt. After spending eleven seasons in the second division, the Fehérvár football club reached the top division for the first time in 1968.

Following their first top-flight season, the team was relegated but returned immediately after one year and became a stable first-division club (Fejér Megyei Hírlap, 2000). Newspaper articles found through the Arcanum archive illustrate this development over time with headlines such as: “Videoton only showed its claws” (Népsport, 1981); “Videoton further increased its debt” (Népsport, 1982); “Videoton plunged into the abyss” (Népsport, 1983); “Videoton paid off its debt” (Népsport, 1985).

The greatest success in the club's history was its 1984–1985 UEFA Cup campaign. The team defeated Dukla Praha, Paris Saint-Germain, Partizan Belgrade, Manchester United, and Željezničar Sarajevo to reach the final. Regarding the return match against Manchester United, Magyar Szó (1985) reported that few believed the weakened Videoton side could overturn a one-goal deficit in front of a record crowd of 25,000. In the final, played in Székesfehérvár before 40,000 spectators, the team lost 3–0 to Real Madrid (Nemzeti Sport, 1995).

Although they achieved a remarkable 1–0 victory in the return leg, they finished as runners-up with a 3–1 aggregate score. This remains the last European cup final reached by a Hungarian club (Népsport, 1985).

In addition to books praising football in this era (Botos, 1991; Posch & Sipos, 1985), numerous articles celebrated the team's achievements, for example: "These boys worked hard! Effectively and exemplary, just as we expect from all our workers" (Népsport, 1985), or "Can Videoton repeat its uniquely outstanding performance and reward its fans with similar success?" (Népsport, 1985), and "I can confirm this, as I had the privilege of witnessing Videoton's excellent cup run two years ago" (Magyar Nemzet, 1987).

Describing the atmosphere of the time, Nemzeti Sport's series "Those Successful Eighties!" reported that the victory was celebrated enthusiastically in Székesfehérvár. Although the county newspaper only briefly announced the team's return from Madrid, fans filled the city center, the team bus was stopped near the Vörösmarty Theatre, and players were carried on fans' shoulders to the Velence Hotel (Népsport, 2003).

After promotion in 1970, the team was relegated again at the end of the 1998/99 season. Népsport summarized the situation by noting that fans had endured multiple crises, including name changes, the emergence of a rival local club (Gázszer FC), the fragmentation of local support, and eventual relegation (Népsport, 2000).

The team returned to the top division the following season and remained a mid-table side for several years. By spring 2005, however, the club had accumulated significant debt, prompting Videoton to withdraw financial support (Fejér Megyei Hírlap, 2007). As the company refused to allow continued use of the brand, the club was renamed FC Fehérvár. Notably, a modified version of the Latin phrase "Veni, Vidi, Vici" appeared on the club crest, emphasizing "VIDI."

During the 2005/06 season, the club's finances stabilized, resulting in its first Hungarian Cup victory (Fejér Megyei Hírlap, 2006), which enabled international participation. However, previous European successes were not replicated. The period was marked by managerial chaos, shareholder legal disputes, and the sale of key players (Fejér Megyei Hírlap, 2007).

By the 2007/08 season, poor performance and severe financial difficulties emerged, with reported losses approaching one billion forints (Dunaújvárosi Hírlap, 2007). Although the club was initially excluded from the first division, it won Hungary's first League Cup that season.

A new era began in 2009 when the Videoton company sold the club to a politically connected entrepreneur (Fejér Megyei Hírlap, 2008). The new owner immediately settled a significant portion of the debt and initiated the process of restoring top-division status. As a result, the club regained its license and began rebuilding (Fejér Megyei Hírlap, 2008).

From the 2009/10 season onward, the club entered a highly successful period. After 34 years, it finished second, qualified for international competition, won the league in 2010/11, and recorded a club-best 66 points in 2012. It also won the Super Cup in 2011 and 2012. After a disappointing 2013/14 season, the team secured its second championship title in 2015 (Fejér Megyei Hírlap, 2015).

During this period, political influence within the club intensified, as reflected in several articles by the magazine *168 Óra* (2011, 2015). In the 2015/16 season, several key players departed mid-season, and despite winning the league, the head coach was dismissed. The owner's absence from the championship medal ceremony and cup final reflected internal tensions.

4. Table: The Club's Achievements

Hungarian Championships	
Gold medal	<u>2010–11</u> , <u>2014–15</u> , <u>2017–18</u>
Silver medal	<u>1975–76</u> , <u>2009–10</u> , <u>2011–12</u> , <u>2012–13</u> , <u>2015–16</u> , <u>2016–17</u> , <u>2018–19</u> , <u>2019–20</u>
Bronze medal	<u>1983–84</u> , <u>1984–85</u> , <u>2005–06</u> , <u>2020–21</u>
Hungarian Cup	
Gold medal	2005–06, 2018–19
Silver medal	5 times – 1981–82, 2000–01, 2010–11, 2014–15, 2020–21
Super Cup	
Gold medal	2011, 2012
Ligue Cup	
Gold medal	3 times – 2007–08, 2008–09, 2011–12
Silver medal	2 times – 2012–13, 2013–14
UEFA Cup	
Silver medal	1 time – 1984–85

Author's own compilation based on the official website of Fehérvár FC (<https://fehervarfc.hu/>)

On July 1, 2018, another name change was introduced, provoking strong opposition from fans. Fans accused the leadership of betrayal and threatened a boycott if no compromise was reached (Fejér Megyei Hírlap, 2018; HVG, 2018).

The team competed under the name MOL Vidi FC, which was later changed again to the satisfaction of fans (Fejér Megyei Hírlap, 2019). All of this demonstrates that changes in club identity that conflict with the values of the fans community can undermine loyalty in the long term, reduce match attendance, and indirectly jeopardize sporting performance.

From the 2019–2020 season onward, the football team competed under the name MOL Fehérvár FC (“The current silver medalist of the NB I, MolVidi FC, announced in an official statement that from the 2019–2020 season it would compete as MOL Fehérvár FC” – Képes Sport, 2019). The club most recently changed its name on July 1, 2018, becoming MolVidi FC from Videoton FC. This decision once again triggered major fan outrage, boycotts, and resistance. “As a consequence of the club’s name change, organized fans groups boycotted match attendance” (Fejér Megyei Hírlap, 2019), which was also reflected in sporting performance. In the 2022–2023 season, the team avoided relegation only in the final round (“In the final round of the NB I, MOL Fehérvár FC secured survival, stating that it ‘would not commit suicide’” – 2023).

The research began in the summer of 2022 and examined fan motivation, satisfaction, and match attendance habits. On June 2, 2023, MOL announced that it would no longer sponsor the club (“MOL withdraws and does not extend its sponsorship agreement with Fehérvár” – Portfolio, 2023; “MOL does not renew its sponsorship contract with the company operating Fehérvár FC” – Dunaújvárosi Hírlap, 2023). As a result, another name change followed, and the club reverted to Fehérvár FC.

Subsequently, the team was relegated to the second division, ownership was transferred to the local municipality, and the club currently competes in the second-tier championship's lower division.

III.2 Research Framework

The formulation of the research questions is based on the findings of previous literature. However, the development of the research framework was challenged by the limited scope of earlier studies directly related to the research questions. Although the concepts and theoretical foundations referenced in this study are well represented in the literature, their combined empirical examination in sport—particularly in football—has been relatively uncommon. Therefore, the research presented in this dissertation and its results constitute a contribution to the academic literature.

The data collection process provided an optimal environment for analyzing the research questions, as the club’s history includes both successful and less successful periods.

Fans have experienced championship titles, international competitions, and the subsequent transitional phases. Consequently, fan attachment, identification, loyalty, and satisfaction coexist within the club environment alongside alienation, disengagement, and dissatisfaction.

The topic addresses an acute issue in Hungary—low attendance in domestic football—which represents a significant economic concern from a sports management perspective.

By examining fan opinions, the study aims to understand the problem through the scientific exploration of match attendance motivation and fan emotions. In addition to contributing to the literature, the findings may also provide managerial support for developing effective solutions. The core premise of sports marketing is primarily about increasing revenues, attracting new fans, and creating new income-generating opportunities. These topics have been extensively explored in previous research, which greatly supported the development of this dissertation's framework.

Before formulating the research questions, it was essential to position the key concepts identified in the literature within the research framework.

The main objective of the study is to explore opportunities to increase attendance based on fans' perspectives, with particular emphasis on fan alienation. The fundamental concepts of brand management discussed in the previous chapter also play an important role in the research framework. The concept of attachment, which lies at the center of the analysis, is closely linked to identification and may mediate the effects of brand associations on brand loyalty.

The research acknowledges that fan attachment and emotions are related not only to identification but also to brand associations, loyalty, and other aspects of consumer behavior, such as willingness to attend matches and maintaining long-term loyalty to the club.

According to Tsotsou (2013), attachment has a direct impact on loyalty, and its strength determines how fans respond to changes in a club's identity, values, or performance. This relationship is central to the dissertation's framework, as understanding alienation requires a detailed exploration of the structure and functioning of attachment.

Another key objective of the study is to empirically extend the Psychological Continuum Model by examining alienation processes. Accordingly, the research design allows for a stage-based, process-oriented interpretation of weakening attachment, grounded in an integrated analysis of qualitative and quantitative data.

III.3 Research Questions

One of the most important contributions of this dissertation to the academic literature relates to the study of fan alienation. While many previous studies have focused on team or club success, this dissertation focuses on fan dissatisfaction. This topic is strongly connected to sports brand management research, particularly because, according to Sayin and Gürhan-Canlı (2024), consumers may perceive disappointment as a form of betrayal (symbolic incongruency), especially when a brand's identity changes and no longer aligns with its previously accepted meaning.

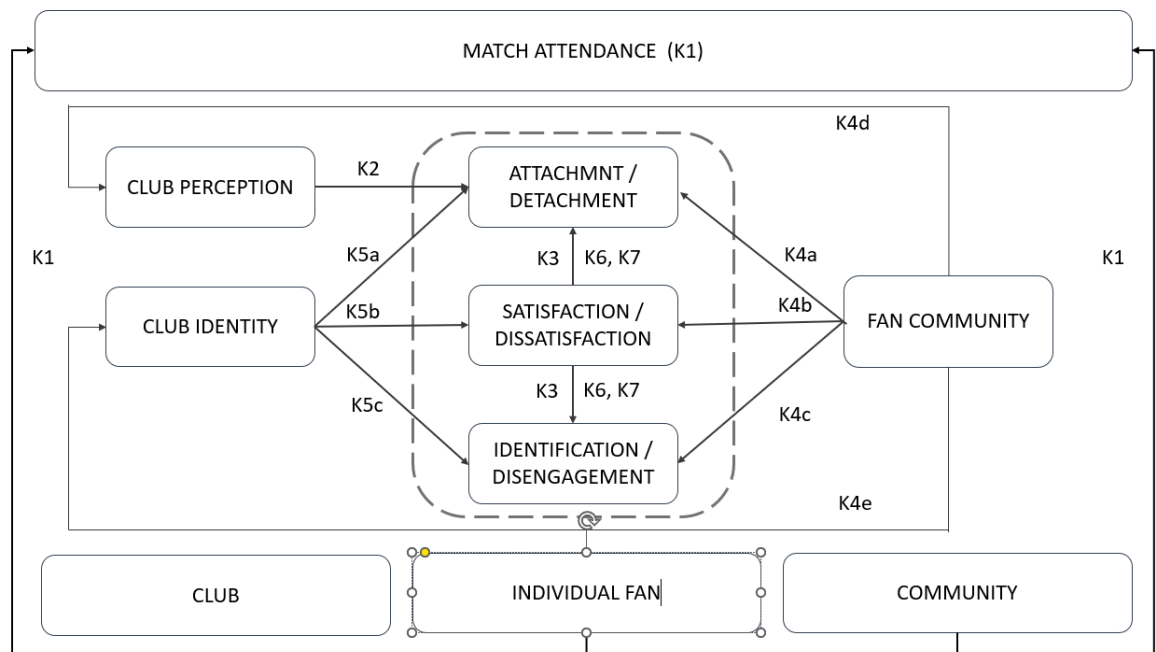
The research presented in this dissertation addresses changes in sports organizations' brands and brand names and the resulting fan perceptions, thereby highlighting the presence and importance of disidentification. The novelty and scholarly contribution of the topic are reflected in the fact that the examined issues are closely related to the relationship between fans and clubs. Fan dissatisfaction may arise from a breach of an implicit or "invisible" contract between fans and the club, and research in this area has only recently begun to develop.

The study emphasizes that fans attending matches do not merely consume experiences but also actively shape the club's social image. It examines how fans' added value is related to the club's reputation. When fans are satisfied, club activities generate recognition, which positively influences the club's public image. When fan community cohesion is strong and the club's reputation is positive, high levels of fan attachment may develop. This is directly associated with increased motivation and willingness to attend matches. Under conditions of strong attachment and a positive club image, match attendance becomes not only a leisure activity but also an identity-forming experience, which helps sustain long-term commitment. In such cases, overall satisfaction with the club is also higher, providing additional stability for its economic and social embeddedness.

Due to the inherent unpredictability of sport, performance fluctuations, economically driven decisions, professional constraints, and competitive disadvantages, both short- and long-term variations may occur in the fan–club relationship and in sporting results. If a club can manage short-term negative fluctuations effectively, it indicates organizational strength and helps stabilize fan relations.

However, persistent negative phenomena constitute a crisis in a club's life. Prolonged periods of poor performance may lead to identity loss, which this research examines through analysis of fan opinions. The aim of the study is to identify the factors associated with identity loss, for which six comprehensive research questions are formulated (7. Figure).

7. Figure: Visual Representation of the Relationships Between the Research Questions



Source: Author's own elaboration

Since the main focus of this dissertation is match attendance, which, in the literature, is closely linked to the concept of behavioral loyalty (brand loyalty), the study aims to understand which individual, psychological, and environmental factors influence fans' willingness to attend matches. In addition, the research seeks to explore how these factors contribute to the development of long-term commitment and to the understanding of the emergence and process of alienation.

The research questions address individual-level influences, with particular emphasis on fans' emotional involvement, identification, and attitudes (Funk & James, 2001; Gladden & Funk, 2001), as well as community and social factors that shape consumer behavior through shared identity and norms (Yoshida et al., 2015). The integrated analysis of different levels of influence enables a complex interpretation of fan behavior and contributes to a deeper understanding of attachment and its weakening processes.

Research Question 1: What factors influence match attendance? (What is the scientific explanation for low attendance levels?)

Match attendance is influenced by numerous factors, including perceived service quality (Clemes, 2011) and the characteristics of the social contract between fans and clubs (Middling et al., 2025).

Since identification with a team has both cognitive and affective dimensions (Dimmock et al., 2005), and fan-based perceptions of the club may contribute to building partnerships between fans and clubs while reflecting fans' thoughts and emotions (Kolyperas et al., 2019), a relationship can be assumed between club perception and fan attachment. This issue is addressed in the second research question.

This research question represents a central element of the dissertation and was primarily examined using qualitative methods.

Research Question 2: How does club perception influence fan attachment?

Fan attachment is characterized by a broad emotional spectrum (Biscaia et al., 2012; Mahony et al., 2000), which may affect both fan satisfaction and perceptions of the club. Fan satisfaction is reflected in match attendance (Madrigal, 1995) and, like identification, can be shaped and managed by clubs (Stevens & Rosenberg, 2012). Furthermore, the quality of the fan experience and communication between clubs and fans play a significant role in strengthening or weakening emotional bonds.

These findings suggest that fan satisfaction is not merely an outcome but also a key determinant of long-term loyalty. Hosseini et al. (2017) previously examined the relationship between fan attachment and satisfaction, providing the basis for this research question.

Since club perception was not measured in the questionnaire survey, this question was investigated primarily through qualitative methods.

Research Question 3: How does fan satisfaction influence attachment to a football team?

Fan attachment depends not only on perceived service quality (Clemes, 2011) but also on emotions related to the team (Biscaia et al., 2012; Mahony et al., 2000). Fans' attachment is highly complex, and co-creation of value contributes significantly to emotional bonding (Doyle et al., 2017; Yoshida et al., 2015). The fan community also plays a crucial role in maintaining attachment. According to Jones (1997), emotional intensity toward a team may become part of a fan's personality. The importance of the community is also evident in recovery mechanisms following negative experiences (Tinson et al., 2023). Accordingly, this research question was formulated.

This question was examined through in-depth interviews. Qualitative findings were complemented by quantitative analyses, including correlation analysis between satisfaction and attachment indicators, enabling nuanced interpretation. The mixed-method approach provided both contextual depth and statistical validity.

Research Question 4: What role does the fan community play in shaping individual attachment/alienation, satisfaction/dissatisfaction, identification/distancing, and club perception and identity?

Fans are not passive consumers but members of social communities whose relationships with clubs are grounded in social identity (Rees et al., 2015). Community belonging significantly influences perceptions of team performance and club evaluation.

Beyond the social contract (Middling et al., 2025), service quality also shapes fan opinions (Clemes, 2011). McMahon and Templeton (2024) argue that club identity is closely linked to fan communities, as fans represent a permanent element in identity formation. Merten et al. (2023) found that fans identify more strongly with teams than with individual players, providing the basis for the fifth research question. This question was also examined using qualitative methods.

Research Question 5: How does club identity influence fan attachment, satisfaction, and identification with the team?

The club–fan relationship can be regarded as a social contract (Middling et al., 2025); therefore, club identity is closely related to fan emotions (Biscaia et al., 2012; Mahony et al., 2000) and satisfaction (Clemes, 2011). Being a sports fan represents a form of social identity (Rees et al., 2015), and violations of this identity may lead to opposition toward the brand (Anaza et al., 2021).

The rapidly expanding literature on negative fan emotions (Scholes, 2004; Rainey et al., 2011; Kwak et al., 2011; Hyatt & Foster, 2015; Lee, 2018) provided the basis for the sixth research question. This question was primarily examined qualitatively, supplemented by correlation analyses between dissatisfaction indicators and identification variables.

Research Question 6: How does fan attachment evolve during periods of dissatisfaction and negative emotions?

Fan satisfaction and dissatisfaction depend not only on perceived service quality (Clemes, 2011) but also on emotions (Biscaia et al., 2012; Mahony et al., 2000). A wide range of emotions accompanies both attachment and alienation processes. Emotions can be classified in various ways (Ekman & Friesen, 1971; Ekman, 1992; Ekman & Cordaro, 2011). Some basic emotions are negative (e.g., anger, fear, sadness, disgust, contempt), alongside positive emotions such as happiness and surprise (Ekman & Cordaro, 2011). Ekman et al. (1987) also emphasized the expression and intensity of emotions, particularly through facial expressions.

In sport, fan emotions are closely linked to social identity (Rees et al., 2015), which, in turn, may influence consumption intentions (Kural & Özbek, 2023). Since attachment was primarily examined through interview analysis, this research question was also addressed using qualitative methods. The key theoretical foundations related to the research questions are summarized in 5. Table

5. Table: Overview of Research Questions

Research Questions	Theoretical Background, Keywords	Literature background
K1	Perceived Service Quality, Social Contract	Clemes (2011); Middling et al. (2025)
K2	Emotions	Biscaia et al. (2012); Mahony et al. (2000)
K3	Emotions, Perceived Service Quality	Clemes (2011); Biscaia et al. (2012); Mahony et al. (2000)
K4	Social Identity Theory, Perceived Service Quality	Clemes (2011); Middling et al. (2025); Rees et al. (2015)
K5	Emotions, Social Contract, Perceived Service Quality	Biscaia et al. (2012); Clemes (2011); Mahony et al. (2000); Middling et al. (2025)
K6	Emotions, Perceived Service Quality	Clemes (2011); Biscaia et al. (2012); Mahony et al. (2000)
K7	ePCM, emotions, emotional distancing, disattachment	Funk & James (2001); Ekman & Cordaro (2011); Madrigal, (2008).

Source: Author's own compilation

Lam (2012) emphasizes that previous research on identity-based marketing relationships—although recognizing identification as a dynamic, time-varying process—has often failed to fully conceptualize it as such. This is particularly important in the context of sport consumption, where fan attachment does not merely reflect a relationship with a brand or product, but also represents a deeper emotional bond with strong identity-forming power. Fan attachment can therefore be understood as an emotional bond that develops between fans and their team (Biscaia et al., 2012; Mahony et al., 2000).

The dissolution of this bond does not simply imply behavioral disengagement but may also represent a rupture in personal and social identity. In sport, where affiliation with a club often becomes part of both individual and collective identity (Rees et al., 2015), this bond can be understood as an “invisible contract” grounded in mutual expectations, loyalty, and emotional commitment (Middling et al., 2025). The breakdown of this contract—resulting, for example, from changes in club values, deterioration of fan experience, or weakening community identity—may constitute a key driver of alienation and loyalty loss.

In examining the determinants of match attendance, this dissertation also focuses on various aspects of this alienation process, reconstructing changes primarily through respondents’ retrospective accounts.

Research Question 7: How can fan emotions related to dissatisfaction be categorized?

This research question aims to identify the stages through which fan attachment weakens and dissolves, and to interpret these stages through an extended application of the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM). The study seeks to explore how the weakening relationship between fans and clubs unfolds through emotional, cognitive, and behavioral changes, and how these changes can be integrated into a coherent, process-oriented model. The analysis is based on the combined examination of qualitative and quantitative data, enabling a dynamic interpretation of alienation. The objective of extending the model is not only to refine the theoretical framework but also to provide empirical validation by illustrating the stages of alienation and their interrelationships.

Through this approach, the study contributes to an integrated understanding of fan attachment and alienation in sport consumption. The analysis focuses on how attachment to a football team evolves during periods characterized by negative emotions.

The research examines both the role of negative emotions in shaping attachment and the potential extension of the PCM by incorporating an alienation dimension, thereby revealing the process of disengagement from the team. The relevance of studying negative emotions is underscored by the fact that the PCM developed by Funk and James (2001) primarily emphasizes positive emotions and attachment developmental stages. The model’s influence stems from its systematic description of attachment development.

In recent decades, market research has incorporated numerous new areas into the study of consumer behavior, partly due to intensified market competition and expanding consumer choice. These processes have contributed to the emergence and intensification of negative emotions, further amplified by digitalization and increased access to information.

The novelty of this research lies in its effort to map not only attachment formation but also attachment weakening, alienation, and associated negative emotions. From both sports economics and sports marketing perspectives, this process is highly relevant, as it contributes to understanding the long-term sustainability and monetary value of fan relationships. In the context of sport, where emotional involvement is robust, this approach is especially significant.

III.4 Elements of the Qualitative Methodology

In this dissertation, qualitative research plays a central role, as the phenomena addressed in the research questions—such as fan attachment, alienation, emotional reactions, and club perception—are complex and context-dependent. These characteristics require a deeper and more nuanced approach, for which qualitative methods are particularly well suited. The exploration of fan opinions was primarily conducted through in-depth interviews with fans and qualitative content analysis of interview transcripts. This approach enabled the identification of personal experiences, interpretative frameworks, and underlying motivations. The application of this methodology not only enabled a detailed presentation of individual perspectives but also contributed to the identification of shared patterns, recurring themes, and emotional dynamics that shape the collective experience of the fan community.

III.4.1 Qualitative Methodological Considerations

Qualitative methodology plays a prominent role in this research, as it does not aim at quantification but focuses on problem exploration and the understanding of phenomena. Qualitative research is typically characterized by an interpretative approach, in which phenomena are analyzed within their own contexts (Elliott & Timulak, 2005; Thorne, 2014). In addition to the interpretative perspective, qualitative research is generally inductive, allowing researchers to derive broader conclusions from specific observations (Thomas, 2006).

Gioia et al. (2013) formulated key principles for conducting qualitative research. According to their framework, essential steps include research design informed by prior literature, data collection with a flexible interview protocol, data analysis involving coding, identification of first-order and second-order themes and theoretical dimensions, and the formulation of theoretical insights based on relationships within the data structure.

This study followed the guidelines of Malhotra et al. (2020) and used the six-step approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first step involved defining the problem and identifying the research domain, followed by the collection of relevant background information. The next stage consisted of developing the research plan, which organized, examined models and procedures to support hypothesis development and address research questions.

According to Miles et al. (2013), it is essential in the coding process to distinguish between initial coding, code revision, and the categorization of codes into themes to identify data patterns. These guidelines informed the development and interpretation of codes in this research.

Creswell and Poth (2016) emphasize the diversity of qualitative methodologies and identify five major approaches: narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case studies. Lindgreen et al. (2021) further extend this framework to include action research and other methodological tools. Combining multiple qualitative methods is also possible and often beneficial.

In business marketing management research, Lindgreen et al. (2021) found that case studies (85.6%), grounded theory (1.5%), and narrative analysis (1.5%) are among the most prevalent approaches. Consistent with these trends, this dissertation relies heavily on in-depth interview data.

In sports marketing research, particularly in football-related studies, qualitative methods such as netnography (Baena, 2019), ethnography (Brandt & Kurscheidt, 2022), grounded theory (Ebrahimi, 2022; Glaser et al., 1968; Mitev, 2012; Sallay & Martos, 2018), in-depth interviews (Fenton, 2018), and focus groups (Baskerville et al., 2016) are widely used. The relevance of qualitative methods is further supported by the fact that fans participate in social “events” and live through “stories” as part of a club’s history, which they articulate through narratives and shared experiences.

One key objective of qualitative data collection was to explore the weakening and breakdown of fan attachment. Special attention was given to experiences, emotional reactions, and interpretations indicating different stages of alienation. These narrative patterns provided the basis for extending the Psychological Continuum Model with an alienation dimension.

Consistent with prior research, this study combines multiple methods, including narrative analysis, ethnography, netnography, and case study approaches.

Case studies typically examine the characteristics of specific phenomena, such as individual teams. Within this framework, in-depth interviews and narrative analysis were used to investigate research questions. Individual interviews lasting 60–80 minutes were conducted using a semi-structured guide. The transcripts were analyzed using qualitative content analysis.

The rigor of the qualitative research was strongly supported by thorough preparation, including an in-depth understanding of local fan culture, attitudes, language use, and regional identity patterns (Lintumäki & Koll, 2024).

Fieldwork was conducted in local hospitality venues, fan zones, and inside the stadium before matches. In addition, netnographic preparation involved daily monitoring of online fan forums—especially before and after matches—analyzing fan language use, engaging in discussions, and sharing and initiating posts. These ethnographic and netnographic observations informed the development of both interview and questionnaire items.

The interview guide was developed in accordance with Kvale’s (2012) methodological principles, emphasizing “why” and “how” questions and narrative prompts. Ethical considerations outlined by Brinkmann and Kvale (2005) were carefully addressed, with particular attention to maintaining equality between interviewer and interviewee.

The primary qualitative method was qualitative content analysis, which involved creating categories and codes and systematically grouping references (Kuckartz, 2019). The acceptance of this method is reflected in Lindgreen et al.’s (2021) identification of interviews as a central data collection technique.

The research design followed the structure proposed by Hoeber (2023), including the establishment of research practice, selection of appropriate designs, theme development, ethical reflection, quality assurance, management of researcher influence, and commitment to continuous learning.

Methodological tools were selected based on recommendations in the literature (Chiovitti & Piran, 2003; Kyburz-Graber, 2004; Patterson et al., 2022), ensuring alignment between research approaches and data collection methods.

In-depth interviewing was therefore chosen as the primary qualitative research method. High analytical rigor was emphasized throughout the study. Following Chiovitti and Piran (2003), particular attention was paid to grounding findings in participants’ actual words rather than researchers’ personal interpretations. This was ensured through systematic analysis of audio recordings and transcripts.

III.4.2 Quality Criteria in Qualitative Research on Fan Opinions

Ensuring the reliability of the analysis placed strong emphasis on triangulation, as Patterson et al. (2022) highlighted in their review of previous qualitative studies. Accordingly, the research process involved the continuous evaluation of relevant literature during code development and data analysis, alongside repeated examination of interview transcripts. This approach helped to minimize potential interpretive biases arising from the meaning-making nature of qualitative data.

In addition, during the development of specific findings, the opinions of another researcher, a co-author of the related publication, were incorporated into the coding process. This practice further enhanced analytical rigor and reliability.

Transparency of results was also a key consideration (Patton, 2015); therefore, anonymized quotations are presented throughout the dissertation. Gioia et al. (2013) introduce the concept of “qualitative rigor” in inductive research, emphasizing the balance between creative interpretation and structured methodology. By applying this principle, the study sought to enhance the credibility of its findings. This commitment to rigor aligns with general standards in marketing research, as summarized by Shah (2024).

The formulation of the research questions began with a systematic review of relevant literature. This process helped refine the study's direction, clarify key concepts, establish theoretical foundations, and facilitate the comparison and documentation of different perspectives.

Such systematic organization contributed to the study's logical structure and to the selection and application of appropriate research techniques. To ensure comparability, data were organized into tables, thereby improving transparency in interpretation and referencing.

The preparation of transcripts was conducted with complete transparency. Anonymized transcripts were made publicly accessible on the dedicated website www.keresemeskutatom.hu, ensuring participant confidentiality and data protection. The platform also presented selected qualitative and quantitative results, including charts and thematic summaries, that illustrated the study's main findings.

Throughout the research process, special attention was paid to meeting Lincoln's (1985) criteria of trustworthiness, particularly regarding objectivity in identifying causal relationships, ensuring legitimacy, and maintaining a consistently open and positive analytical perspective. This approach aimed to preserve scientific credibility, minimize bias, and avoid overly harmful or destructive interpretive frameworks, thereby supporting the validity and applicability of the research findings.

III.4.3 Methodological Considerations in Designing an Independent Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative research constituted an essential methodological element in understanding the research problem. Although the literature often describes qualitative research as an unstructured, exploratory method (Kim & Mao, 2021; Malhotra et al., 2020), this study sought to develop a logically structured interview guide during the preparatory phase.

It was anticipated that some respondents might be reluctant to answer specific questions, as—even under conditions of anonymity—they might hesitate to express negative opinions about their favorite team. However, this risk was minimized through careful question sequencing and neutral phrasing.

The interview questions focused on fan values, emotional drivers, and motivational factors, while also seeking more profound insight into respondents' perspectives. Transcripts were prepared with complete transparency and made publicly available in anonymized form on the dedicated website www.keresemeskutatom.hu, ensuring participant confidentiality and data protection.

The website also presented selected qualitative and quantitative findings, including charts and thematic summaries, that illustrated the study's main results. Throughout the research process, special attention was given to meeting Lincoln's (1985) trustworthiness criteria, particularly objectivity in identifying causal relationships, ensuring legitimacy, and maintaining an open and positive analytical stance.

This approach aimed to preserve scientific credibility, minimize bias, and avoid destructive or overly harmful interpretive frameworks. The use of projective techniques further enabled the exploration of less conscious and partially unconscious information. Participant selection prioritized individuals with relevant knowledge and experience in the research topic.

A comprehensive understanding of the problem required familiarity with the local context, including geographical location, social and demographic characteristics, statistical indicators, political and cultural conditions, and economic factors. This contextual knowledge facilitated the identification and recruitment of suitable interviewees.

Following the literature review and development of the interview guide, the qualitative research proceeded with participant recruitment, data collection, and fieldwork. Initial recruitment was conducted in connection with three matches held in Székesfehérvár: MOL Fehérvár FC vs. Ferencvárosi TC (March 13, 2022), MOL Fehérvár FC vs. Puskás Akadémia (April 23, 2022), and MOL Fehérvár FC vs. Budapesti Honvéd (May 3, 2022). Additional participants were recruited through invitations distributed within the fan community.

6. Table: Characteristics of Participants in Qualitative Study

Interviewees	Frequency of Match Att.	Type of Tickets	Age	Level of Education
Interviewee 1	No longer attends	Ticket	50 years above	Higher Education Qualification
Interviewee 2	Attends almost every match	Ticket	35 years below	Higher Education Qualification
Interviewee 3	Attends almost every match	Ticket	35-50 years	Higher Education Qualification
Interviewee 4	Attends almost every match	Ticket	35-50 years	Higher Education Qualification
Interviewee 5	Attends almost every match	Season tickets	35-50 years	Higher Education Qualification
Interviewee 6	Attends once or twice a year	Season tickets	35-50 years	Higher Education Qualification
Interviewee 7	Attends once or twice a year	Ticket	35 years below	Higher Education Qualification
Interviewee 8	Attends once or twice a year	Season tickets	35-50 years	Higher Education Qualification
Interviewee 9	Attends almost every match	Season tickets	50 years above	Higher Education Qualification
Interviewee 10	Attends almost every match	Ticket	35-50 years	Higher Education Qualification
Interviewee 11	No longer attends	No longer attends	50 years above	Higher Education Qualification
Interviewee 12	Attends almost every match	Ticket	35-50 years	Higher Education Qualification
Interviewee 13	Attends once or twice a year	Ticket	35-50 years	Higher Education Qualification
Interviewee 14	No longer attends	No longer attends	50 years above	Higher Education Qualification
Interviewee 15	Attends once or twice a year	Ticket	50 years above	Higher Education Qualification
Interviewee 16	No longer attends	No longer attends	35-50 years	Higher Education Qualification
Interviewee 17	Attends almost every match	Season tickets	35-50 years old	Higher Education Qualification
Interviewee 18	No longer attends	Season tickets	35-50 years old	Higher Education Qualification
Interviewee 19	No longer attends	Ticket	35-50 years old	Higher Education Qualification
Interviewee 20	Attends once or twice a year	Season tickets	50 ages above	Higher Education Qualification
Interviewee 21	Attends almost every match	Ticket	35 age below	Higher Education Qualification
Interviewee 22	Attends almost every match	Season tickets	50 ages above	Higher Education Qualification
Interviewee 23	Attends almost every match	Season tickets	35-50 years old	Higher Education Qualification
Interviewee 24	Attends almost every match	Ticket	35-50 years old	Higher Education Qualification
Interviewee 25	Attends almost every match	Season tickets	35-50 years old	Higher Education Qualification
Interviewee 26	Attends almost every match	Season tickets	35-50 years old	Higher Education Qualification
Interviewee 27	Attends once or twice a year	Ticket	35-50 years old	Higher Education Qualification

Source: Author's own compilation

Efforts were made to ensure gender neutrality in participant selection; however, the sample was predominantly male. This reflects the traditionally stronger interest of men in football, as evidenced in match attendance behavior. Similar patterns were observed by Jones (2000), who found a significantly higher proportion of male fans in his qualitative sample.

Although scholarly attention to female fans has increased in recent years, Pope (2013) notes that many questions remain unresolved, particularly regarding motivation, loyalty, and community participation.

A detailed description of the sample is provided in Table 3. The respondents were highly interested in sport and attended matches of the selected football club to varying degrees (6. Table).

The predominance of male participants in the sample can be partly explained by cultural and social factors. As Földesi (1996) emphasizes, female football fans in Hungary rarely attend live matches, thereby limiting their representation in stadiums and fan communities. This pattern was also evident in the research sample, indicating that domestic football culture exhibits significant gender inequalities. These disparities require further investigation in order to better understand diversity in sports consumption.

Regarding age distribution, the aim was to cover the widest possible spectrum. Participants were classified into three age groups (under 35, between 35 and 50, and over 50). The youngest respondent was 19, while the oldest was 67. The sample size indicates data saturation: 27 interviewees participated in the study, including 26 men and 1 woman.

The recorded interviews were transcribed into nearly 300 pages of text. Data analysis was primarily conducted using NVivo 1.7.2 software. In parallel, manually coded data recorded in Excel were also analyzed. The grouping of codes yielded several thematic categories, while manual clustering supported the development of the analytical model.

The in-depth interviews typically lasted approximately two hours and were conducted in private, face-to-face settings. Most interviews took place at the Corvinus University of Budapest's Székesfehérvár campus, while three were conducted in the participants' homes. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded. Respondents answered prepared questions to share their thoughts, memories, emotions, levels of commitment, and evaluations of the club's activities.

At the beginning of each interview, the research topic was introduced, and participants provided informed consent for the use of their data (e.g., "The interview will be recorded for easier processing (consent: yes/no)" and "The club may also become aware of the research"). Ensuring anonymity was a central ethical principle. Based on the sample characteristics, the selected interviewees represented a broad spectrum of fans, differing in age, educational background, and match attendance frequency. Interviews were conducted on an ongoing basis, and after the initial sessions, the research became known within the fan community. Positive feedback from online fans and local platforms helped build trust, which, in turn, encouraged participation. Despite differences in opinions, a strong sense of shared community and belonging was evident throughout the interviews.

Participants expressed diverse perspectives, emotions, motivations, memories, and attitudes related to fandom and club identity. Their narratives revealed a wide range of reactions, from agreement and loyalty to criticism and protest, as well as stable routines and motivations underlying match attendance.

Participant recruitment was discontinued once additional interviews no longer yielded substantially new information, indicating saturation. The interviews were conducted in a relaxed and conversational atmosphere, resembling everyday dialogue, while remaining guided by a structured interview protocol. Although spontaneous responses were encouraged, respondents were also given time to reflect when necessary. A wide range of emotions—including enthusiasm, affection, anger, disappointment, and frustration—was observed.

Interviews began with assurances of anonymity and general introductory questions (e.g., “Please tell me a few words about yourself,” “Where do you live?” “What is your relationship with Székesfehérvár/Fejér County?”). These were followed by questions about personal memories (e.g., “What are your earliest memories related to football in Fehérvár?”) and current perceptions of the club (e.g., “What is the best and worst aspect of MOL Fehérvár FC?”).

Warm-up questions focused on personal attachment to the club and helped establish a trusting atmosphere. Participants were also encouraged to share negative experiences and critical views. Questions addressed both past and present associations, enabling a balanced exploration of positive and negative emotions.

To gain deeper insights into identification, loyalty, and attachment, various projective and interactive techniques were employed. These included personification exercises (e.g., “If MOL Fehérvár FC were a person...”), ranking tasks, and image-based interpretation. Participants also reflected on factors influencing match attendance, motivations, barriers, and persuasion strategies.

Specific questions examined attitudes toward the team and the club, brand image, visual identity, and personal identification with these elements. Participants were also asked about the relationship between the club and the city, public interest in football, and local governance. Further topics included stadium experience, service quality, post-match emotions, media consumption, and the influence of news and social media on attendance decisions. Questions also addressed pre-match, in-match, and post-match routines, rituals, and meeting points, as well as the relationship between loyalty and attendance intentions (McDonald et al., 2006).

These questions encouraged respondents to freely express their views, articulate criticisms, and highlight perceived problems. Consistent with Edensor (2015), many fans felt entitled to comment on sporting and managerial issues, and the interview framework provided space for such expressions.

Transcription emphasized depth and accuracy in capturing emotional and contextual meanings. The resulting dataset, composed of participants' narratives and reflections, supported a nuanced interpretation of the research questions. Preliminary findings were presented at academic forums through publications and conference presentations. Feedback from these venues helped refine the conceptual model and extend the existing literature.

The choice of a qualitative methodology was further justified by its flexibility, which enabled the integration of the researcher's autonomy with the research objectives. The analytical phase applied multiple techniques, including word association, personification, content analysis, habit analysis, and ranking procedures. These methods supported the examination of attendance behavior, commitment, satisfaction, pricing perceptions, personal attachment, brand image, city–club relations, community integration, information-seeking behavior, and perceptions of the sporting environment. Themes and participant quotations were systematically grouped to ensure transparency and logical coherence. Quotations were selected based on relevance and uniqueness. Finally, the qualitative findings enabled the subsequent quantitative analysis of selected themes, providing a foundation for the methodological components presented in the following section.

III.5 Elements of Quantitative Methodology

Although the dissertation and the research questions are primarily focused on qualitative methods, quantitative methods also played a significant role in the study's structural design. Based on the findings of the qualitative analyses, it can be concluded that attachment to the team is closely related to attachment to the city and to urban sports culture, which constitute key dimensions of fan identity.

The city, as an integral part of the sports environment, not only provides the spatial and cultural framework for the fan community but also carries symbolic significance that shapes the club's social embeddedness and fan loyalty. Since research on sports ecosystems is a relatively novel approach in the literature (Buser et al., 2022), the quantitative study placed particular emphasis on the combined examination of attachment to the city and other relevant variables, including trust in the club, match attendance intention, and fan community engagement.

This methodological integration enabled a deeper interpretation of the qualitative findings and facilitated their statistical validation, thereby allowing them to be incorporated into the dissertation's theoretical and empirical framework.

The objective of the quantitative analysis was not limited to exploring relationships between individual variables, but also included examining how fan attitudes, emotions, and behavioral intentions form distinct patterns across different stages of the alienation process. The results contributed to a stage-based interpretation of weakening attachment and provided empirical support for the proposed model extension.

III.5.1 Quantitative Methodological Framework

Quantitative methodology is a research approach based on numerical data collection, measurement, and analysis to understand social phenomena and their effects. Its fundamental paradigm is that observable and measurable outcomes can be derived from data to test hypotheses, examine causal relationships, and generalize results (Alford & Teater, 2025). It is also effective for testing theories and analyzing large samples (Rauteda, 2025). To enhance scientific integrity, quantitative research relies on objective measurements and provides empirical evidence through systematic analysis.

Studies typically apply random sampling to increase representativeness and minimize bias (Mahardini et al., 2024). However, challenges include potential sampling bias, validity issues, methodological limitations, and ethical concerns related to data management (Rauteda, 2025). While quantitative research offers valuable insights through empirical evidence, it may overlook the complexity of human experiences. This limitation suggests the need to integrate qualitative methods into a mixed-methods approach to achieve a more holistic understanding of research subjects (Emon, 2024; Neulinger, 2016).

According to the literature, quantitative research in marketing should be preceded by appropriate qualitative research to identify research problems, as was the case in the present study. Qualitative findings are often used in subsequent explanatory research to formulate generalizations about the target population. The literature emphasizes that qualitative and quantitative approaches complement rather than compete. Numerous studies have provided methodological foundations for marketing research and survey design (Fellman, 1999; Gibson, 2000; Horváth, 2004; Malhotra et al., 2009; Szűcs et al., 2020; Rencz, 2022).

A key difference between qualitative and quantitative methodologies lies in the development of questionnaire structure.

In this study, the survey instrument was designed based on relevant literature (Bauer et al., 2008; Biscaia et al., 2012; Braunstein & Zhang, 2005; Dimmock et al., 2005; Doyle et al., 2013; Dwyer, 2015; Filo et al., 2008; Funk et al., 2009; Funk & Pastore, 2000; Gladden & Funk, 2002; Hasan et al., 2016; Heere & Dickson, 2008; Izzo et al., 2014; Kajos et al., 2017; Kaynak et al., 2008; Kunkel et al., 2016; Mahony et al., 2000; Neale & Funk, 2006; Trail & James, 2001; Wang et al., 2011; Branscombe & Wann, 1992), complemented by the author's own conceptual considerations.

Following data collection, the work of Simon et al. (2024) provided retrospective validation of the questionnaire structure and strengthened the methodological framework.

The practical implementation of the quantitative research was strongly supported by previously validated scales and empirical findings reported in the literature, which served as the basis for formulating the questionnaire items.

Attitudinal Loyalty

Strengthening commitment to teams and understanding attitudinal loyalty are key concepts in examining the psychological factors that influence decision-making and, consequently, fan behavior. According to Doyle et al. (2013), attitudinal loyalty refers to the psychological commitment that fans (consumers) demonstrate toward a sports team (brand). It is essential for understanding how attachment and commitment to a team influence consumer behavior, such as match attendance and merchandise purchases (McDonald et al., 2006).

Furthermore, attitudinal loyalty is a fundamental component of long-term relationship maintenance, as it provides a stable emotional and cognitive framework for fan decision-making. These considerations indicate that examining attitudinal loyalty is not only theoretically relevant but also of practical importance for sports brand management.

Enhancing the fan experience by creating emotionally engaging experiences, building communities that strengthen feelings of belonging, fostering connections through digital platforms, offering merchandise aligned with fan identity, and introducing engagement programs can collectively support long-term fan commitment (Wang et al., 2011). Kaynak et al. (2008) define attitudinal loyalty as a fan's enduring preference and commitment to a particular team or brand.

This form of loyalty encompasses both psychological processes and behavioral outcomes, meaning that consumers not only behave loyally (e.g., by attending matches) but also maintain favorable attitudes toward the brand.

Funk and Pastore (2000) identified nine specific attitudinal attributes that reflect different dimensions of loyalty and influence how fans perceive and relate to their favorite teams. These attributes, grouped into three main dimensions—attitudinal factors, cognitive structures, and subjective beliefs—summarize the degree of long-term fan commitment. They indicate how significant a team is to a fans and what psychological value is attributed to it. Experiences of joy and disappointment play decisive roles in shaping attitudinal loyalty.

Gladden and Funk (2002) discuss attitudinal loyalty in relation to brand associations and fan behavior, arguing that it reflects psychological commitment formed through the interaction of team-related knowledge, emotional attachment, and social influence. These factors shape how individuals evaluate and relate to their preferred teams.

Kunkel et al. (2016) consider attitudinal loyalty a core component of fan loyalty in sport. They suggest that fans with strong attitudinal loyalty tend to support their teams regardless of performance, as positive brand-related experiences reinforce favorable associations. This finding is supported by Heere and Dickson (2008), who showed that fans often remain loyal despite unsatisfactory team performance (“I would continue to support my team even if they are unsuccessful”).

Research also emphasizes the importance of brand associations in shaping loyalty. Neale and Funk (2006) found that fan satisfaction is positively correlated with intentions to attend matches and re-engage with teams. Moreover, fan brand communities encourage consistent attendance and support through social and digital channels. Mahony et al. (2000) analyze attitudinal loyalty from several key perspectives, defining it as the psychological bond between consumers and teams. Measuring the strength of this commitment enables meaningful differentiation between “occasional spectators” and “deeply committed” fans.

The development of attitudinal loyalty is influenced by several factors, including personal identity, viewing the team as a reflection of the self, shared community experiences, emotional bonds formed through match attendance and events, and the presence of friends and family. In addition, fan satisfaction and positive experiences gradually strengthen feelings of belonging and support long-term loyalty. Biscaia et al. (2013) identified attitudinal loyalty as a significant predictor of behavioral loyalty. Their study highlights the importance of understanding both attitudinal and behavioral dimensions of team loyalty in sports sponsorship contexts. They suggest that fostering strong emotional connections between fans and teams can enhance sponsorship effectiveness, benefiting both sponsors and clubs.

Their findings indicate that both psychological attachment and actual purchasing behavior significantly influence fans' attitudes toward sponsors, which are crucial for understanding sponsor-related responses.

Cognitive Identification

According to Dimmock et al. (2005), cognitive identification refers to fans' awareness of their role within a community and their recognition of group membership. It reinforces the idea that social categorization is governed by cognitive processes that emphasize similarities within the group and differences from out-groups.

Research indicates that cognitive identification plays a crucial role in understanding community dynamics and prejudice. The relationship between mental and affective identification is significant in explaining how fans, as individuals, relate to their communities and teams. This empirical link suggests that fans who cognitively identify with a community or team are also likely to develop strong emotional attachments.

Cognitive identification plays a significant role in shaping relationships between fans and sports teams by influencing loyalty, emotional commitment, and community building. Understanding these dynamics can improve sports marketing strategies and enhance fan engagement within the sporting environment. Heere and James (2007) found that, especially in the context of sports fandom, cognitive identification is a psychological process through which individuals align their self-concepts and personal fan-related beliefs with the community's identity. This form of identification is influenced by multiple dimensions that contribute to the overall fan experience and loyalty to teams and communities. These processes affect self-esteem and social perception, meaning that fans' personal feelings and internal evaluations of their communities may differ from public opinion.

Based on shared team identification, fans often form social networks and communities, thereby strengthening social presence and mutual support. The perception that personal identity is intertwined with group identity further reinforces a sense of belonging. In-group cohesion and the recognition of interdependence enhance fans' self-esteem, creating a reciprocal relationship between individual and collective evaluation.

The cognitive perspective is reflected in fans' conscious understanding of team identity and values, as well as in the awareness of how these dimensions align with personal beliefs and self-concepts. Cognitive identification strengthens team loyalty and increases commitment, influencing fans' behavior and purchase intentions for team-related products and events.

Higher levels of cognitive identification may also lead to stronger emotional reactions to team performance, such as joy after victories or despair after defeats. These emotional responses significantly affect fans' psychological states and deepen their connection to the team.

Affective Identification

Affective identification plays a significant role in shaping how fans relate to their team and fans community, as well as how these relationships influence broader social dynamics. Its close ties with cognitive identification and its distinction from evaluative dimensions highlight the complexity of group attachment and bias.

According to Dimmock et al. (2005), affective identification is often combined with cognitive identification. The interaction of these two dimensions is a stronger predictor of group norms and bias than other forms of identification, such as personal evaluative identification. The strength of affective identification is also influenced by whether group membership is voluntary. Individuals who consciously choose to identify with a group tend to show greater emotional commitment, thereby reinforcing group solidarity. This relationship illustrates how emotional bonds shape perceptions of other social groups.

Affective identification represents a core mechanism in the relationship between fans and teams or fans communities. It influences loyalty, emotional attachment, and fan behavior. By understanding the psychological dimensions of group membership and intergroup relations, sports organizations can enhance fan engagement and build stronger community ties.

At the individual level, affective identification refers to the emotional attachment between fans and their fans community, team, or its broader environment. This attachment stems from the emotional significance of group membership and shapes fans' attitudes, behaviors, and consumption patterns. Fans are not conventional consumers; their motivations are often rooted in emotional and identity-related factors, which strongly influence purchasing decisions.

Heere and James (2007) identified several key dimensions associated with affective identification with sports teams. Their findings indicate that affective identification contributes to durable and resilient loyalty, influencing fan behavior and the consumption of sport-related merchandise. Of particular importance is the social embeddedness of fans within broader social networks.

Sports teams frequently embody multiple external identities, including community, ethnicity, and geographic affiliation. These identities reflect cultural, economic, and spatial relationships within a given locality and play a crucial role in shaping and reinforcing identification with the team.

Emotional attachments create multiple long-term points of connection, making it difficult for fans to disengage or alter their loyalties. Consequently, abandoning a team may be experienced as the loss of a significant part of one's personal identity. Strong identification with a team and its community can foster deeper social participation and strengthen feelings of belonging among fans.

Evaluative Identification

While affective identification—referring to fans' emotional attachment to their team—is closely intertwined with cognitive dimensions such as knowledge of the club's history, achievements, and values, evaluative identification reflects how individuals perceive their own team and how they believe others evaluate it. This dimension is typically distinct from other forms of identification (Dimmock et al., 2005). This distinction suggests that emotional attachment and evaluative perceptions may operate independently in specific contexts. For instance, fans may remain emotionally committed to their team despite perceiving negative changes in their objective performance or social reputation.

Conversely, situations may arise in which a team maintains a positive external image and social status, while individual emotional attachment declines due to unfavorable personal experiences or interactions. This duality has essential methodological and practical implications for the study of fan loyalty, alienation, and club identity, as it highlights that different dimensions of attachment may respond at varying rates and in various ways to environmental, performance-related, or organizational changes. The separation of affective and evaluative identification is particularly relevant in sport, where the fan experience is shaped simultaneously by personal experiences, collective interactions, and external feedback. When a team's social prestige, media visibility, or international recognition is high, evaluative identification may remain strong even if individual emotional experiences temporarily deteriorate. In contrast, declining performance or controversial organizational decisions may weaken affective identification more rapidly, while evaluative identification responds with a delay. Understanding this phenomenon is crucial for sport brand management, as it enables club leadership to implement targeted interventions to strengthen emotional bonds and mitigate negative shifts in external perceptions.

Such a differentiated approach can contribute to the long-term sustainability of fan loyalty, even in changing sporting and market environments.

Behavioral Involvement (Behavioral Loyalty)

According to Dimmock et al. (2005), behavioral loyalty is strongly associated with team identification, which reflects fans' psychological attachment to their team, including match attendance and emotional investment in improving team performance.

Understanding the dynamics of behavioral involvement is central to sport organizations seeking to cultivate a committed fan base and enhance the overall spectator experience. Consequently, research has increasingly examined the nuances of team identification and loyalty, particularly in light of changing patterns of sport consumption and fan engagement. Psychological attachment to a team influences a wide range of behaviors and emotions related to fans' involvement in their chosen community and their autonomous decision-making processes. Both the cognitive (knowledge and beliefs about the team) and affective (emotional attachment) dimensions of identification contribute significantly to the development of fan loyalty.

Fans who voluntarily commit to a team or community are more likely to demonstrate strong social solidarity. Emotionally engaged fans often remain loyal regardless of performance outcomes and continue to support their team even in challenging periods. This suggests that fans' independent evaluations of their team play a key role in shaping loyalty and highlights how both personal and external assessments (i.e., how others perceive the team) influence individual commitment. Highly identified fans tend to take pride in their team's successes, whereas less committed fans may distance themselves more easily during periods of failure.

Commitment to the team and its community manifests in various forms of behavioral involvement, including increased match attendance, merchandise purchasing, and more intensive interaction with the club through social media platforms. Fans often prioritize their own fans groups over external or rival communities and seek to maintain positive distinctiveness by emphasizing in-group superiority. The energy invested in these activities strengthens feelings of belonging and community cohesion. These patterns indicate that behavioral loyalty is a complex phenomenon shaped by multiple psychological and emotional factors. Heere and James (2007) examined fan commitment through match attendance, merchandise interest, and participation in team-related activities.

This form of loyalty is frequently rooted in strong emotional attachment and identification, reinforced by factors such as community engagement and group identity. At its core, behavioral loyalty is grounded in fans' tendency to identify with the team. This perception strengthens commitment and is reflected in the frequent use of collective pronouns (e.g., "we") when referring to the team, indicating a strong sense of social identification.

Furthermore, organized events that allow fans to celebrate together, community-based benefits, and initiatives linking clubs to local communities can deepen feelings of belonging. Such practices enhance emotional attachment, resonate with fans' personal values, and ultimately strengthen long-term loyalty.

III.5.2 Methods Applied in Quantitative Research

In the dissertation, the quantitative analysis used several complementary statistical methods to identify the underlying structures of fan behavior and attitudes. Cluster analysis was applied to segment the fan population into homogeneous groups, thereby identifying segments characterized by different levels of attachment, motivation, and attitudinal patterns. This approach enabled distinguishing distinct fans profiles within the broader fan base.

Factor analysis was employed to reveal the latent dimensions and relationships underlying the observed variables, thereby reducing dataset complexity and enhancing interpretability. By identifying common factors, this method contributed to a more systematic understanding of the interrelationships among key constructs.

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to examine statistically significant differences among fan groups in variables such as satisfaction, loyalty, and match attendance intention. This technique enabled comparisons across multiple groups and supported the identification of meaningful behavioral and attitudinal differences.

The combined application of these methods not only facilitated more precise answers to the research questions but also enabled the quantitative validation of phenomena identified in the qualitative analysis. Consequently, this mixed-methods approach strengthened the validity and generalizability of the research findings.

Cluster Analysis

Based on the cluster analysis results, the individuals in the study can be grouped into distinct segments. The primary objective of cluster formation is to ensure high within-cluster similarity while maximizing between-cluster differences (Simon, 2024). According to Mur et al. (2016), the fundamental principle of cluster analysis is to maximize internal cluster cohesion and enhance inter-cluster separation, which can be assessed using various statistical indicators.

The main types of cluster analysis are hierarchical and non-hierarchical, which differ substantially in their underlying logic. Hierarchical cluster analysis is based on the progressive merging or splitting of clusters and is particularly useful for determining the optimal number of clusters. In contrast, non-hierarchical methods, such as K-means clustering, are faster and better suited to large datasets, though they require the prior specification of the number of clusters. In practice, combining both approaches is often recommended: hierarchical clustering can be used to explore the data structure and identify potential cluster solutions, followed by non-hierarchical methods to refine group assignments.

In hierarchical cluster analysis, each observation initially forms a separate cluster, and the closest clusters are merged stepwise until a single cluster remains or the desired number of clusters is reached. The resulting cluster hierarchy can be visualized using a dendrogram, which helps select the optimal number of clusters and facilitates interpretation. Non-hierarchical clustering, by contrast, identifies all clusters simultaneously, typically based on a predefined number of groups. Observations are assigned to cluster centroids, and classifications are iteratively adjusted until convergence is achieved (Simon et al., 2024).

In this dissertation, the optimal number of clusters was determined based on the dendrogram.

Factor Analysis and Principal Component Analysis

By applying factor analysis to a large number of observed variables, the underlying latent dimensions and structural relationships among variables can be statistically identified. This method enables grouping variables by shared characteristics and contributes to a more transparent, interpretable data structure. Factor analysis is an exploratory and flexible technique, particularly advantageous in studies where prior hypotheses have not been clearly formulated and where group structures are unknown (Simon et al., 2024).

In this dissertation, factor analysis was applied primarily to constructs that are not directly observable and are therefore associated with latent variables. Given the absence of a predefined factor structure, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was employed to identify underlying dimensions. The results of the factor analysis were linked to questionnaire items developed based on validated measurement scales reported in the literature.

The identified factors served as inputs for subsequent cluster analyses and comparisons across cluster groups. Furthermore, the dissertation's relevant factors were incorporated into Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) procedures.

Principal Component Analysis (PCA) examines relationships among variables with the primary objective of dimensionality reduction, that is, transforming a large set of variables into a smaller number of meaningful components. Although PCA is methodologically related to factor analysis, there are significant theoretical differences between the two approaches.

According to Adachi (2020), PCA focuses primarily on reducing dimensionality, whereas factor analysis aims to identify common underlying factors. While PCA emphasizes variance maximization, factor analysis seeks to uncover fundamental relationships among variables, leading to different interpretative frameworks.

The adequacy of PCA results can be assessed using several statistical indicators. Total Variance Explained (TVE) reflects the proportion of total variance accounted for by the retained components, indicating how effectively the original information content is preserved (Simon et al., 2024). In addition, the component matrix presents correlation coefficients (ranging between -1 and +1) between variables and principal components.

Bartlett's Test of Sphericity is a preliminary statistical test used to assess the suitability of data for factor analysis and PCA. The test examines whether there are significant correlations among variables. It produces a chi-square statistic and a p-value. When $p < 0.05$, the null hypothesis is rejected, indicating that the data are appropriate for factor analysis. If $p \geq 0.05$, factor analysis is not recommended, as the correlation matrix does not differ significantly from an identity matrix.

The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure assesses sampling adequacy and indicates whether a dataset is suitable for factor analysis. KMO values above 0.50 are generally considered acceptable (Simon et al., 2024).

Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach, 1951), which measures internal consistency. Alpha values above 0.70 are typically regarded as satisfactory (Hair et al., 2021).

Comparison of Clusters

To compare the values of variables derived from principal component analysis across different groups (clusters), analysis of variance (ANOVA) was applied. ANOVA is a statistical technique used to test whether there are significant differences among the means of two or more groups. In this analysis, the independent variable is a non-metric, categorical variable—commonly referred to as a factor—while the dependent variable is measured on a metric scale (Simon et al., 2024).

One key assumption of ANOVA is that the dependent variable is measured at an interval or ratio level, whereas the independent variable is categorical. In addition, the method assumes that the error terms are normally distributed with a mean of zero and constant variance, and that the variances are equal across groups (homogeneity of variance) (Simon et al., 2024).

These assumptions ensure the reliability and validity of the results and support the meaningful interpretation of differences observed among the identified clusters.

III.5.3 Data Related to Quantitative Study

The questionnaire survey specifically focused on sports fans, including football fans, in Székesfehérvár. Due to the survey's specialized topic, it targeted individuals interested in local sports and football. To ensure successful data collection, the dissemination of the questionnaire was supported by local media coverage, the endorsement of four County Assembly bodies, the support of three mayoral offices in county-level cities, active participation in fan forums, and direct contact with approximately 150 companies in Székesfehérvár. The questionnaire was available for completion for three weeks.

In addition to testing the formulated hypotheses, the research aimed to assess the relevance of the dimensions identified in the literature and to validate the qualitative study's findings, particularly regarding fan satisfaction and opinion formation.

A total of 448 respondents started completing the questionnaire. By the end of the data collection period, 252 complete questionnaires had been submitted. After data cleaning, 192 valid responses remained, constituting the final sample used for model testing and hypothesis testing. To enhance participation, fieldwork activities, including leaflet distribution, were also conducted to promote the survey.

The questionnaire was structured into internal sections that reflected different thematic areas and analytical dimensions.

Compared to the formats recommended in the literature, the questionnaire was considerably longer than average, with 250 items. In anticipation of potential response fatigue and to increase completion rates, several questions of high interest to fans, though not directly related to the dissertation's primary focus, were also included. Before dissemination, the questionnaire was pilot-tested by students enrolled in sport marketing courses who volunteered as part of their academic activities. Based on their feedback, wording and structure were refined, and the final version was established. The questionnaire scales were partly based on scientifically validated instruments and were supplemented with items derived from previous qualitative research, particularly regarding satisfaction. All validated scales were adapted to the specific context of the present study. Responses were measured using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 7. In addition to basic demographic variables, the questionnaire addressed topics such as the relationship between the environment and fans, club–fan interactions, match attendance behavior, team identification, perceptions of the MOL Arena, and overall fan opinions. The sample, its sampling method, and demographic characteristics cannot be considered representative. Due to the questionnaire's title and thematic focus, participation was limited to individuals with at least some interest in local football. Among respondents, 84.4% were male. The largest age group was 45–54 years (31.3%), followed by 35–44 years (25%), indicating an overrepresentation of middle-aged respondents, which is understandable given the research topic. Regarding marital status, 50% of respondents were married, 13.5% lived with a partner, and 23.5% were single. Childless respondents represented the largest group (42.7%), followed by those with two children (25.5%) and one child (17.7%). Individuals with higher education qualifications were strongly overrepresented: 38.5% held a college or bachelor's degree, 27.6% had completed university or master's studies, and five respondents (2.6%) held a PhD. Approximately 30% had secondary-level education.

In terms of occupation, nearly half of the sample (46.9%) consisted of white-collar employees, 19.3% held managerial positions, and 11.5% were blue-collar workers or self-employed professionals. Students represented 9.9% of respondents. Regarding place of residence, 53.6% lived in a county seat, 19.8% in the capital city, 12.5% in other towns, and 12% in villages or rural settlements. Perceived income level was measured on a scale from 1 to 10. The mean value was 4.85, with a median of 5. Approximately 14.6% of respondents did not consider themselves fans of Fehérvár FC; nevertheless, their opinions were included due to their commitment to local sports. The remaining respondents had supported Fehérvár FC and its predecessor clubs for an average of 26 years.

IV. RESEARCH FINDINGS

The research questions addressed in this dissertation relate to multiple dimensions of fan opinions, attitudes, and behaviors, including emotional attachment, alienation, club perception, match attendance intention, and the role of the fan community. The comprehensive examination of these interrelated topics justified the combined use of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies, as the two approaches complement each other in providing both an in-depth, context-sensitive understanding and statistically supported, generalizable results.

Qualitative methods—primarily in-depth interviews and content analysis—enabled a detailed exploration of fan experiences, emotions, and motivations. In parallel, quantitative techniques, most notably cluster analysis, factor analysis, and analysis of variance, contributed to quantifying identified patterns and to statistical examination of relationships among variables. This methodological integration facilitated the development of a rich empirical foundation and ensured the presentation of scientifically robust and reliable research findings.

IV.1 Qualitative Findings

The qualitative study examined the relationship between match attendance and various factors influencing fans' behavior, attitudes, and attachment to the club, focusing on MOL Fehérvár FC, a participant in the Hungarian first-division football championship (OTP Bank Liga). The primary objective of the research was to provide a deeper understanding of the interrelations among fan experiences, motivations, emotional responses, and the potential causes leading to alienation, taking into account the club's sporting performance, managerial decisions, stadium infrastructure, ticket pricing policies, and the internal dynamics of the fan community.

The applied methods—primarily in-depth interviews with fans and qualitative analysis of the transcripts—allowed exploration not only of individual experiences but also of collective patterns of community identity, loyalty, and trust in the club. The findings indicate that match attendance is not merely a form of sports consumption but rather an identity-based, emotionally driven practice shaped by the interaction of multiple internal and external factors. Qualitative analysis revealed that, for fans, the experience of attending matches is closely connected to social relationships, the club's history and identity, and the stadium atmosphere.

In addition, a strong personal and emotional attachment arises from a sense of belonging to the club, which significantly shapes how the matchday experience is interpreted and valued. According to respondents' accounts, positive experiences centered on feelings of community belonging, collective support, and the preservation of club traditions. In contrast, adverse experiences were mainly associated with managerial decisions, ticket prices, the quality of stadium services, and fluctuations in team performance.

Notably, several interviewees emphasized that their motivation to attend matches often extends beyond sporting results and is instead rooted in shared community experiences, symbolic identity maintenance, and emotional attachment to the club. This finding supports perspectives in the sport marketing literature suggesting that, to sustain fan loyalty, sports organizations should not rely solely on on-field performance but should manage the fan experience in a complex, multidimensional manner.

IV.1.1 Stages of Fan Attachment

One of the central research questions of the dissertation concerns match attendance, which is closely related to fans' relationships with their sports club. The study seeks to identify the factors that motivate fans to attend matches and that generate intention, willingness, and actual attendance behavior. Match attendance motivation and behavior were explored through the following factors: (1) social prestige and pride, (2) attachment to Székesfehérvár, (3) attachment to MOL Fehérvár FC, (4) community, (5) emotional release, (6) entertainment and boredom reduction, (7) socialization, (8) love of the sport, (9) match atmosphere, (10) hostility toward rivals, (11) reliving memories, (12) professional development, (13) expressing belonging to MOL Fehérvár FC, and (14) wearing club merchandise.

Among these factors, match atmosphere and attachment to Székesfehérvár proved to be the most influential motivations for attendance, while boredom reduction and opportunities for hostility were the least important. Despite criticism and negative associations toward the club, expressing affiliation with MOL Fehérvár FC ranked highly among regular attendees. This suggests that committed fans maintain a strong attachment primarily rooted in historical identity, local affiliation, and the emotional atmosphere of football.

At the same time, especially among the most loyal fans, there is a prevailing perception of insufficient recognition and limited involvement in club affairs. Consequently, even when sporting performance is taken into account, a significant increase in attendance is not expected from this group.

Interestingly, the importance of community did not emerge as a dominant motivational factor for match attendance. As one interviewee stated:

“The ultras are great, they create a good atmosphere, it adds extra value and compensates even when the team loses.” (Interviewee 8)

Attention was devoted to infrequent attendees and former fans who had previously attended matches but no longer do so. According to the interviews, the club has lost much of its appeal for these individuals. Although they continue to follow local football through media channels, they no longer attend matches in person. Some have shifted their loyalty to other sports, such as ice hockey, while others have reported deep disappointment with the club’s current situation. Several respondents now follow the team from abroad.

“In ice hockey, I found authenticity and real value that I could no longer find in football.” (Interviewee 23)

According to interviewees, regardless of their frequency of attendance, weak attachment often stems from perceived hostility toward fans, deficiencies in communication, lack of interaction between the club and fans, dissatisfaction with brand changes (name and emblem modifications), weak local embeddedness of management and players, limited matchday atmosphere, and inconsistent sporting performance. These factors generate strong negative emotions, leading fans to feel uncomfortable at matches and to prefer alternative leisure activities in Székesfehérvár.

“Since it became MOL Fehérvár, I haven’t been. I don’t feel that I belong there anymore.” (Interviewee 19)

The process of relationship development between fans and the club can be interpreted through the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) proposed by Funk and James (2001), which distinguishes four stages of fan attachment. The first stage is awareness. In the case of MOL Fehérvár FC, this is primarily related to the club’s strong local presence, as most individuals interested in sport are initially connected to geographically accessible teams.

“I was born here. Fehérvár’s colors are blue and red, the teams are red and blue—both evoke patriotic feelings.” (Interviewee 12)

Early memories were typically linked to childhood or early adolescence and were strongly influenced by male family members, friends, school, and personal sporting activities.

“I first went to a Videoton match in 1988 with my grandfather. He made me love football.” (Interviewee 2)

The second stage of the PCM is attraction. This stage is shaped by memorable and pride-inducing experiences, such as the club's UEFA campaign in 1985, matches against Trabzonspor, or encounters with major rivals. Family involvement, memorabilia, fan-created objects, and iconic players also contribute to emotional engagement. References to legendary players (e.g., Csongrádi, Szabó, Mayer, Nego, Fiola, Nikolić) were frequent. Both the old stadium and the modern arena were perceived as critical symbolic elements.

"I collected newspaper articles and cut out team photos..." (Interviewee 20)

The attraction stage is followed by attachment. Club attachment is closely linked to attachment to the city, its colors, history, former club names, and emblems. This relationship is reciprocal: loyalty to the club reinforces attachment to the town.

Interviewees frequently expressed pride and a sense of belonging through collective language ("we"), thereby strengthening group cohesion. No significant differences were observed based on geographical origin.

"For me, Székesfehérvár is the center of the world... and because of Vidi, I'm emotionally tied to it." (Interviewee 24)

The fourth stage of the model is allegiance. This phase is characterized by emotionally charged expressions, admiration for club symbols, intense passion, and persistent emotional involvement. As the study was conducted during a relatively unsuccessful period, criticism and frustration were common. However, these adverse reactions reflected deep emotional investment and loyalty.

Fans frequently expressed dissatisfaction with tactics, player policies, and identity-related issues. At the same time, their strong attachment legitimized their sense of responsibility to propose solutions and restore the club's success. Local embeddedness remained a key determinant of loyalty, and it was also found that emotional attachment does not necessarily correspond to season ticket ownership.

"A person supports one team for life. This love remains, no matter what the club is called." (Interviewee 3)

The study further confirmed that the most critical attendance motivations were match atmosphere and local attachment. Despite criticism, expressing affiliation with the club remained a core driver among regular fans, indicating acceptance and emotional resilience; nevertheless, feelings of exclusion and a lack of appreciation limited further growth in attendance.

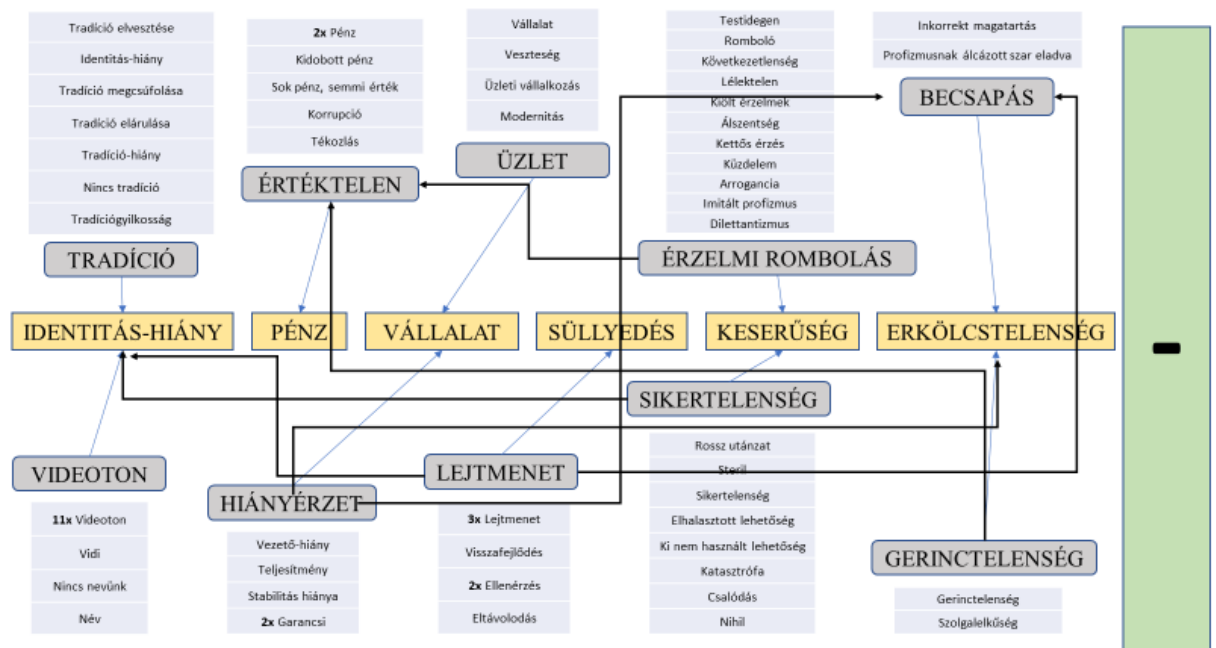
Former fans and infrequent attendees continued to follow football through the media but disengaged from live attendance.

These findings confirm that the management of club image represents a strategically important factor in maintaining fan loyalty and ensuring long-term match attendance. In the dissertation, associations related to the club encompassed both positive and negative meanings (8. Figure).

Based on the fans' opinions, the findings indicate that negative perceptions were more prominent than positive ones. At the same time, favorable associations appeared less frequently and were limited to only a few dimensions of the club's image. The negative associations are primarily related to issues of club identity, financial management, corporate governance, sporting underperformance, and perceived ethical misconduct.

Overall, the analysis of negative associations suggests that, from the interviewees' perspective, the club is characterized by an identity deficit, reflecting weakened emotional and symbolic ties between the organization and its fans base (9. Figure).

9. Figure: Negative Associations Related to the Club (Hungarian)



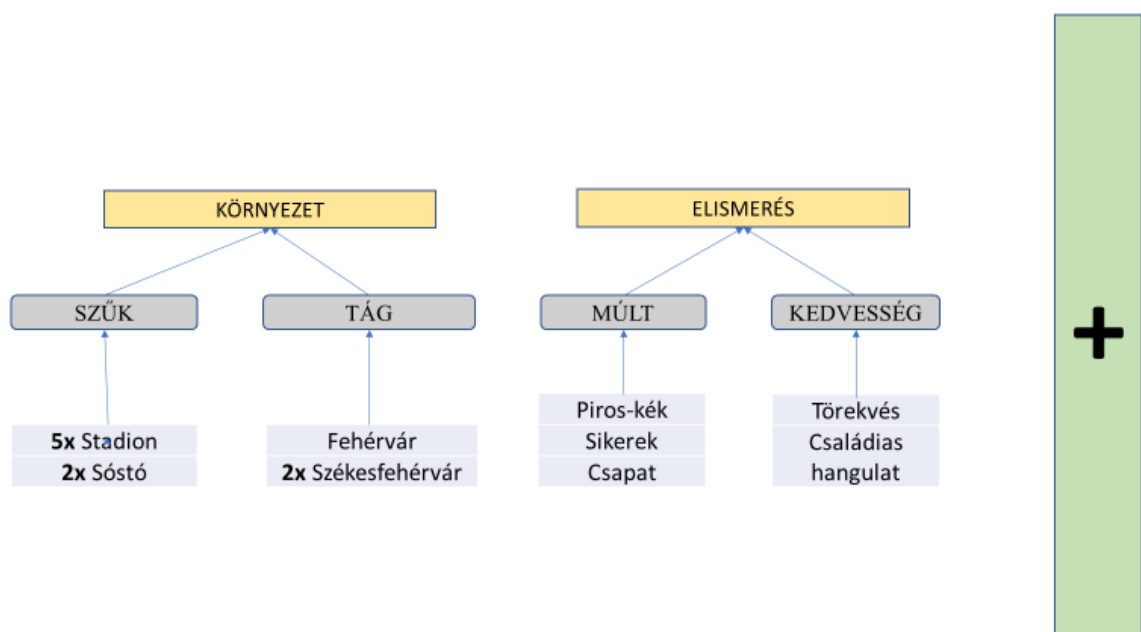
Source: Author's own compilation

These dimensions collectively reflect widespread dissatisfaction with the club. Several subthemes were linked to sporting success and failure, financial stability, and emotional attachment to the club. Feelings of bitterness, hopelessness, and disappointment emerged strongly in the fans' narratives.

Respondents frequently criticized the club's excessive financial orientation and alleged mismanagement, with corruption accusations also recurring in the interviews. Furthermore, the club's moral conduct was repeatedly questioned, with respondents describing it as unfair, impersonal, destructive, hypocritical, arrogant, and incompetent. A particularly sensitive issue concerned club identity, as many fans expressed a sense of loss regarding the former Videoton name, heritage, and traditions. The perceived absence, neglect, or even distortion of historical legacy was frequently emphasized.

Positive opinions primarily focused on the immediate and broader physical environment. They were also reflected in expressions of appreciation for the club's past and for specific fan-oriented initiatives launched by the organization. The stadium and its infrastructure received favorable evaluations, as did the protected natural environment of Sóstó surrounding the venue, as well as the city of Székesfehérvár in a broader sense as the club's home. In fans' feedback, positive memories of former teams and past successes were expressed in a nostalgic tone, along with references to the family-like atmosphere of earlier matches. In addition, respondents acknowledged certain efforts made by the club's management to improve the fan experience; however, according to their assessments, the effectiveness of these initiatives was mixed and, in some cases, clearly perceived as insufficient.

10. Figure: Positive Associations with the Club (Hungarian)



Source: Author's own compilation

These findings suggest that the preservation and strengthening of positive associations are closely linked to the club's long-term reputation and the maintenance of fan attachment. The feedback indicates that both the quality of the physical environment and the preservation of historical values can provide a strong emotional foundation for fans loyalty. This also highlights that the development of the fan experience should not be based exclusively on current sporting performance but should also involve the conscious cultivation of the club's history, traditions, and community values.

Such positive experiences related to the club may reinforce trust between the organization and its fans community, which, in the long term, can help protect against the negative effects of adverse events and temporary declines in performance (10. Figure).

The image of the examined football club is vividly illustrated through the personified representations provided by the interviewees, which include numerous emotionally charged and evaluative descriptors.

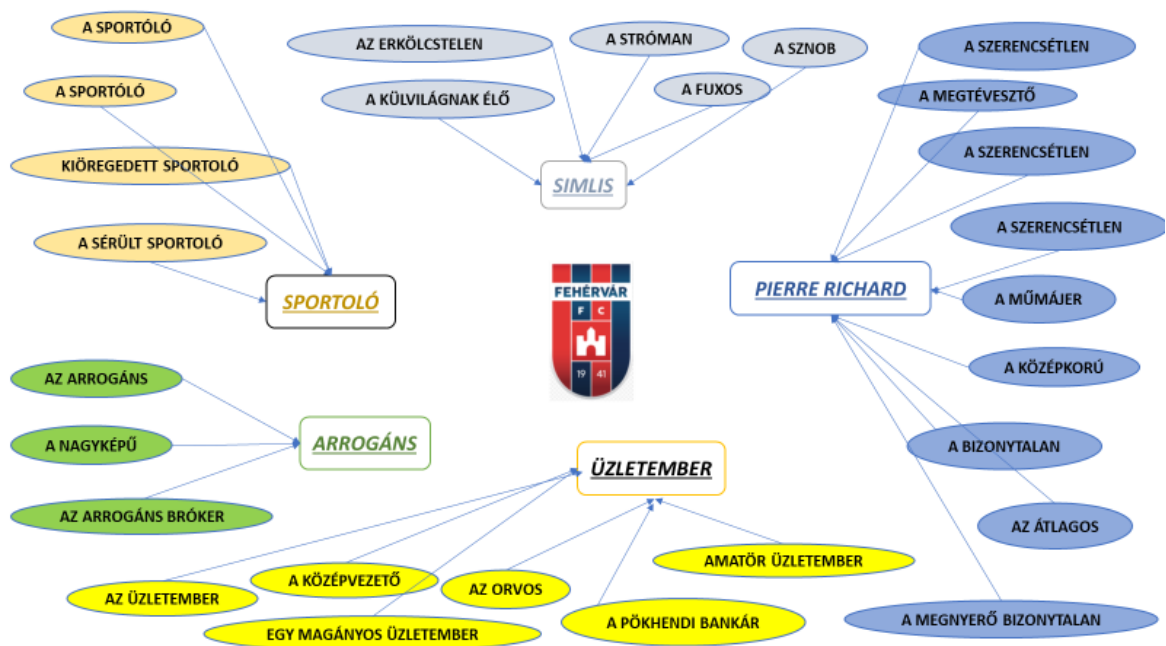
The negative expressions appearing in the responses—such as “lonely,” “arrogant,” “pretentious,” “average,” “uncertain,” “unfortunate,” “deceptive,” “snobbish,” “conceited,” “haughty,” “injured,” “living for external recognition,” “aging,” or “amateurish”—reflect unfavorable attitudes associated with the club. These perceptions often indicate dissatisfaction, distrust, or a perceived lack of authenticity. Among the positive associations, only the descriptor “appealing” appeared, suggesting that unfavorable evaluations currently dominate the club's overall image.

Regarding the occupations assigned to the imagined, personified club, “athlete” was mentioned most frequently, which can be explained by the club's core sporting activity and athletic identity. At the same time, other roles primarily linked to economic or social status—such as “broker,” “banker,” “businessperson,” “front man,” or “doctor”—also emerged. However, in most cases, these roles carried predominantly negative connotations within the given context.

These findings indicate that the club's image in fans' eyes is strongly influenced by perceptions of economic interests, elitism, and social distance, which may weaken opportunities for community identification and emotional attachment.

Conceptually similar and semantically related expressions were grouped into thematic clusters and labeled accordingly (11. Figure).

11. Figure: *Attributing Human Characteristics to the Club (Hungarian)*



Source: Author's own compilation

All of this suggests that the club's image, in the eyes of fans, is powerfully shaped by perceptions related to economic interests, elitism, and social distance, which may reduce opportunities for community-based identification. This phenomenon is closely aligned with theories of fan alienation, as the negative traits and roles attributed to the personified club indicate emotional distancing and the gradual weakening of identity-based attachment.

Based on the expressed opinions, the following "human" image of the club emerges: a former mid-level athlete who was forced to end his career due to age and injuries. Someone once told him, "You should become a leader," yet he lacks the necessary knowledge and managerial experience. This individual appears as a snobbish, arrogant frontman who has suddenly reinvented himself as a businessman and has come to believe in this self-image. At the same time, he is essentially insecure and pretentious, attempting to compensate for his shortcomings through loud, arrogant, and boastful behavior, living for external recognition. In reality, his status corresponds to that of an unethical middle manager whose guiding principle is "we will fix it somehow," and who uses improvised, makeshift solutions. He appears as an unfortunate, isolated, clumsy, insecure, average, middle-aged amateur.

Overall, the responses depict an unfortunate, isolated, clumsy, insecure, average, middle-aged amateur. Based on this characterization, it can be concluded that participants in the study hold a strongly negative perception of Mol Fehérvár FC.

Within this predominantly negative image, dissatisfaction, criticism, and anger are expressed simultaneously, reflecting a profound erosion of trust and emotional attachment toward the club.

IV.1.3 The Significance of the Stadium

In the world of football, the stadium is not merely the venue of matches but one of the most essential pillars of fans identity. As the team's home ground, the arena represents a powerful point of association that becomes deeply embedded in the fans' thinking. It is no coincidence that theoretical frameworks of sports marketing, particularly brand equity models (e.g., Gladden and Funk, 2001), interpret this venue as a symbolic and functional extension of the brand. Brand associations with the stadium play a key role in developing fan loyalty, as emphasized by Bács and Kozma (2018), Maderer (2016), and Kunkel et al. (2016).

As a service environment, the stadium is a decisive factor in the quality of the sporting event. The atmosphere of the home ground, its visual elements, acoustics, and the collective presence of the fans community all contribute to the unique experience for sports consumers.

The team's identity is manifested in the stadium: its history, colors, logos, and local ties—everything that Gladden and Funk (2002) describe as core brand associations. Commitment to sports brands is not only behavioral but also deeply psychological. Fan involvement represents a psychological connection, as defined by Celsi and Olson (1988) and Zaichkowsky (1985), as a mental bond between a person and an object. In a sports context, this attachment may be directed toward players, coaches, teams, leagues, and toward the stadium, which becomes a symbolic space of belonging through its physical presence.

According to Charleston (2009), the stadium is not merely a structure but a “home”—a place that carries emotional and communal meaning for fans.

The physical and symbolic presence of the stadium transforms it into a community space: a setting for loyalty and a sense of belonging, where fans can experience collective rituals of togetherness and strengthen their emotional attachment to the club. Woratschek et al. (2020) empirically demonstrated that team identification enhances loyalty not only directly but also indirectly through positive perceptions of stadium atmosphere. Their research shows that the stadium, as an experiential environment, strongly influences the club's overall image.

As one of the most iconic material elements of the sports world, the stadium appears not only as a physical space but also as a complex marketing tool.

Within the marketing mix (7P), it falls under the environmental and physical elements, and its role extends beyond mere functionality—it conveys brand meaning. It communicates the value the club represents to its fans. This study examines, through fans opinions, the relationship between stadium-related brand associations and attitudinal loyalty, the extent to which these strengthen fan satisfaction, and which areas are evaluated negatively.

The opinions revealed in the qualitative research paint a complex picture of perceptions of the stadium. Although a significant portion of the statements convey a generally negative tone—especially regarding club management, match organization, or the weakening of community experiences, most stadium-related associations are positive. This confirms earlier findings in the literature that the stadium is a key element of fans identity and, through its emotional and symbolic dimensions, a prominent component of brand attachment.

However, in response to the interview question (“23. What does it feel like to enter MOL Fehérvár FC’s home stadium, the MOL Sóstó Arena? Have you always felt this way? If not, when did you feel differently? Please describe this experience as well.” Critical voices also appeared alongside positive attitudes.

These criticisms mainly concern usability, accessibility, and atmosphere. Such statements highlight shortcomings in functionality and emotional impact:

“Why should we go there, to that concrete jungle?” – Interviewee 2

“They messed things up too, because the stadium is not passable... You cannot get from one side to the other.” – Interviewee 20

“Entering the current stadium feels sterile. My heart does not skip a beat... it is nice, it is good, but my heart does not skip a beat... probably because it is not filled with the momentum that the old stadium had. And you can feel that...” – Interviewee 17

“...When I enter, there is too much gray for me, I feel less that it is really the team’s stadium.” – Interviewee 26

At the same time, positive evaluations often highlight aesthetic and technical dimensions and reflect new forms of emotional identification.

Modernity, advanced infrastructure, and visual appearance not only enhance the stadium’s positive brand image but also strengthen fans pride:

“The new stadium is magnificent... and the surroundings are very nice too.” – Interviewee

“I really love the new stadium, I like it a lot, it is modern, I have no problems with it.” – Interviewee 15

“This stadium gives something modern.” – Interviewee 16

“It is better to enter the facility now, because I like it, and it was great when it was being built—I walked by every day to see it.” – Interviewee 20

“A magnificent, European-level stadium. No question.” – Interviewee 21

“My feet were rooted to the ground. All I could say was: Our beloved stadium, you have become wonderful.” – Interviewee 24

“A special experience... I think the new stadium is magnificent, a higher-level facility.” – Interviewee 26

“I absolutely love the stadium.” – Interviewee 27

Overall, the material reveals a dual perception in which the stadium simultaneously embodies modernity, development, and aesthetic value, while also symbolizing the loss of former community experiences.

This suggests that stadium-related brand associations are built not only on physical characteristics but also on deeper emotional and nostalgic dimensions. This provides relevant empirical insights into the attitudinal components of loyalty and attachment to the club.

IV.1.4 Club Perception

Fans’ attitudes toward the club are shaped not only by emotional attachment and commitment but also by their evaluations of the club’s current operations, image, and values. Club perception is therefore not static; somewhat, it is continuously shaped by individual experiences, community interactions, and the club’s performance. Based on respondents’ opinions, a multifaceted picture emerges in which, alongside positive memories and traditions, intense criticism and negative emotions also appear. In the following section, the dissertation presents the content elements and emotional nuances of these associations related to club perception.

One of the most important elements of football club perception is fans’ views of the sports facility. With the demolition of the former stadium, an era and a chapter of club history came to an end; however, memories and traditions remain firmly embedded in fans’ minds and evoke deep emotional responses.

In the case of the MOL Sóstó Arena, opinions and emotional attachments associated with the former facility and the new stadium can be clearly distinguished, partly because of the venue's name.

An interesting finding is that, despite expressed dissatisfaction with the management and ownership structure and suggestions for more welcoming services and improved facilities, the overall perception of the MOL Sóstó Arena remains positive. Opinions about the stadium tend to reflect a cautiously optimistic attitude, emphasizing the value of innovation and the need for a new facility, while also highlighting its environmental qualities and the positive features associated with its novelty. Overall, interviewees generally spoke appreciatively about the venue:

“Basically, it always feels good to enter; it feels like going home.” (Interviewee 3)
“It is a huge source of pride that the new stadium has been completed; it turned out great, and I am glad that not only the stadium but also the surroundings were invested in.” (Interviewee 5)

“I think a good stadium has been built in Fehérvár.” (Interviewee 7)

At the same time, considerable criticism was directed at catering services. The expressed opinions highlight concrete problems in event organization and the level of care shown to fans. Based on these views, fans assume a lack of interest and insufficient attention on the part of the club and facility management:

“But the worst thing is the food stands’ selection.” (Interviewee 2)

“It is extremely frustrating that only three out of five stands are open; I do not believe they can find two more people to run them.” (Interviewee 15)

“The catering needs to be improved, because the selection is awful and expensive for what it is...” (Interviewee 18)

Although positive experiences and emotions in sport generally receive greater attention—forming the basis of attachment, commitment, and loyalty—negative experiences that shape fans’ perceptions are also common, given the nature of sport. According to the findings of this study, negative club perception emerges in relation to six main thematic areas: (1) Business, (2) Club Management, (3) Political Influence, (4) Lack of Partnership, (5) Sporting Performance, (6) Match-Day Service Quality.

7. Table: Categorization of Fans Opinions

Problem Areas	Subthemes	Exemplary Quote	
BUSINESS	Financial Operatic	“There should be more responsible financial management.” (Interviewee 13)	
		“They should actually work.” (Interviewee 15)	
		“A lot of money and value for nothing.” (Interviewee 16)	
	Brand	“I have hated the MOL Fehérvár name from the start.” (Interviewee 11)	
		“It is hard for me to connect with the current MOL Fehérvár.” (Interviewee 13)	
		“The current management does not represent the club’s values or traditions.” (Interviewee 15)	
		“A mockery of tradition.” (Interviewee 16)	
		“This is not the Vidi I used to love back in the day—it is just its successor, an imitation.” (Interviewee 17)	
	CLUB MANAGEMENT	Club Owner	“Something has broken in me... regarding football in Fehérvár.” (Interviewee 6)
“The owner’s support has faded, both financially and in terms of commitment.” (Interviewee 8)			
“He no longer authentically wants this.” (Interviewee 18)			
“The club’s owner does not care either.” (Interviewee 24)			
Sporting Director		“If he cannot realize his plans, then he should not attach his name to it.” (Interviewee 14)	
		“The sporting director has buried himself among the fans. This is too big a challenge for him.” (Interviewee 11)	
Marketing Department		“There is probably not enough marketing in the city.” (Interviewee 7)	
		“They should improve their relationship and communication with fans.” (Interviewee 8)	
		“Expanding the fan base is not working; it is a complete joke.” (Interviewee 10)	
		“The club should be made a bit more people-centered.” (Interviewee 17)	
POLITICAL INTERFERENCE		Political Interference	“There is powerful political influence at MOL Fehérvár.” (Interviewee 2)
			“Political and economic capital appears, and this pushes many people away—they do not feel it is theirs and do not feel attached.” (Interviewee 3)
	“Unfortunately, politics has become mixed into the team, and those arrogant, cold people I see coming in...” (Interviewee 15)		

		<p>“Political influence appears here too. Decisions that are incomprehensible to fans irritate the community.” (Interviewee 18)</p> <p>“...and we know that the owner is a businessman close to the ruling party and how many contracts his construction company receives from the current government.” (Interviewee 22)</p>
LACK OF COOPERATION	Neglect of Fans	“No one understands this lack of interest.” (Interviewee 3)
		“Fans relations are handled in an ad hoc manner.” (Interviewee 10)
		“They kill emotions and attachment to the fans.” (Interviewee 17)
	Erosion of Club Identity	“Those who run the club do not realize that they are killing the club’s roots.” (Interviewee 10)
		“This ‘big corporate’ approach from Budapest does not sit well with me.” (Interviewee 9)
		“They do not treat it as a traditional club; there is no identity.” (Interviewee 13)
“They should move closer to the city and the local people.” (Interviewee 21)		
SPORT PERFORMANCE	Lack of Success	“The losing streak at the beginning of the year, which the team slipped into, affected me deeply.” (Interviewee 6)
		“There should be success... what is most depressing for me is that I do not see it in this team.” (Interviewee 20)
	Loss of Prestige	“The whole country is laughing at us for spending billions and producing this kind of performance.” (Interviewee 21)
GAMADAY SERVICE QUALITY	Poor Matchday Entertainment	“This is ridiculously little. Put out a proper food stand, organize something... invite a guy with a guitar... let him sing, so people feel, damn it, that they want something from us.” (Interviewee 5)
		“...some kind of music is playing. Here in Fehérvár, something old, something retro, some nonsense.” (Interviewee 7)
		“There are all kinds of useless programs and stupid stuff.” (Interviewee 9)
	Catering Quality	“The queues at the food stands were very long. It is extremely frustrating that only three out of five are open—I do not believe they can find two more people to run them.” (Interviewee 7)
		“The catering is what it is; I thought it would be better, but it was not.” (Interviewee 8)
		“The food service needs improvement, because the selection is awful... and expensive for what it is.” (Interviewee 10)

Source: Author’s Own Compilation

The brand associations identified during the analysis are not only related to club perception but also strongly connected to fans' emotions and the degree of attachment. This supports the idea that the brand's positive or negative meanings directly influence the formation of fans identity and the intensity of emotional identification with the club.

Negative phenomena related to attachments, such as loss of trust, disappointment, or emotional distancing from the club, may negatively affect fans identification and loyalty maintenance. In the long term, these factors may contribute to processes of alienation and shape the development of fans behavior.

The previous section presented the problem categories related to club perception (7. Table).

Business

According to the interviews, emotionally attached fans who strongly identify with the team consider themselves capable, responsible, and sufficiently knowledgeable to express opinions on the club's financial affairs.

The interviewees showed a particularly critical attitude toward the club's business activities. Their views are primarily based on rumors and hearsay; in other words, they lack concrete information and have formed their opinions primarily on secondhand accounts.

The Business theme can be divided into two categories: Financial Management and Brand. In terms of financial management, fans with higher education qualifications showed greater interest in economic processes and were more willing to articulate intense criticism. It is noteworthy that those who no longer attend matches and those who attend only rarely expressed much stronger negative views ("they had all the money in the world" – Interviewee 16) than season ticket holders.

Although season ticket holders also display a critical attitude toward financial management, their statements tend to be more moderate ("many people in Fehérvár are bothered by the fact that there is supposedly financial backing, yet there is no upward trend or breakthrough... it is very volatile" – Interviewee 18). Another relevant observation is that fans who identify more strongly with the team perceive the club's financial management as their own concern to such an extent that they formulate suggestions or specify concrete tasks: "the money should have been reinvested in the club" – Interviewee 24.

The study also revealed that negative fans opinions are strongly linked to branding, particularly to the club's name.

To this day, fans primarily associate the club with the brand name used during its most successful period (VIDEOTON), and they have demonstratively protested for years against the new brand name introduced by the new owner. It is important to note that since 1992, the club has had nine different names, including those of current sponsors and the city.

According to fans, changing the club's name constituted an offense that fundamentally undermined the partnership between fans and the club. This change disrupted the cooperative relationship that had existed between fans and the organization:

"In my view, they should stop using the name MOL Fehérvár FC." – Interviewee 6

"...I do not think this is how it should have been done." – Interviewee 8

"They threw the name in the trash right away clueless." – Interviewee 10

"It is an unfortunate story that the club discarded such a major brand like this." – Interviewee 19

"This whole MOL Vidi, Vidi, Fehérvár thing is incomprehensible to me now, and I am not even interested anymore." – Interviewee 21

The interviews also indicate that frequent name changes weaken fans' attachment to the club. At the same time, season ticket holders tend to be more positive (for example, more open to the appearance of new sponsors), while those who attend matches less frequently often cite the "name issue" as one of the reasons for their absence and strongly reject accepting the changes:

"I have hated the MOL Fehérvár name from the start... I do not know any team like that." – Interviewee 11

"They are trying to sell shirts and products with this name and logo, but I have no intention of buying any of that." – Interviewee 17

"I feel an extreme anger when I think of MOL Fehérvár, and also a sense of shame—although I should not be the one feeling ashamed, it is there whenever that name comes to mind." – Interviewee 21

Overall, these opinions clearly indicate the presence of negative emotions among fans, even though they still feel emotionally close to other brand elements, such as the club's colors and logo (without the name):

"The city's colors are blue and red, the teams are red and blue—both evoke patriotic feelings. My attachment to both defines my life; they are fundamental colors in my life." – Interviewee

4

Club Management

Fans express numerous criticisms toward club management. These criticisms were grouped to account for the specific roles to which they relate. Accordingly, four categories were identified, representing positions and functions: Owner, Sporting Director, and Marketing Department.

Across these roles, the intensity of negative fans' emotions is similar. In the case of the Owner, opinions primarily reflect distance, disinterest, and neglect. The emotional nature of fans' attachment stands in contrast to a predominantly economic, business-oriented mindset, which is often perceived as alien to fan values.

The conflict between emotional and economic considerations is evident across all fans groups, regardless of match attendance frequency. Accusations of owner irresponsibility are common, referring either to behavior (“...dictatorial.” – Interviewee 1; “... does not care about the club.” – Interviewee 11; “arrogant.” – Interviewee 14) or to presence and absence (“an owner managed from the capital.” – Interviewee 12; “he strayed off the road on a trip and ended up here in Sóstó.” – Interviewee 15). The owner is frequently criticized and urged to improve communication with fans (“he should change how he communicates with fans.” – Interviewee 4), and fans note that his interest in the club has declined over the years (“what he was like when he came to Fehérvár and what he is like now... there is a world of difference.” – Interviewee 20).

Dissatisfaction with the Marketing Department and its leadership is the strongest, as this area has the most direct and visible contact with fans. The main issues concern weak fans relations and inadequate or low-quality marketing communication:

“Fans do not want to see training photos and videos or where the team has been... or how they went barbecuing and had fun.” – Interviewee 12

“He does not care enough about marketing to generate more than 2,000 spectators.” – Interviewee 18

Respondents also criticized the neglect of community building (“The failure to expand the fan base is a complete joke.” – Interviewee 10; “They should try harder to attract spectators.” – Interviewee 17). The tone is often personal and accusatory (“the marketing manager is sitting there because he is someone’s someone connected to the owner.” – Interviewee 16).

The Sporting Director received the least criticism. This role was mentioned least frequently, and dissatisfaction mainly came from fans who no longer attend matches. This can be explained by the fact that, at the time of the research, the position was held by a well-known former player who was closely linked to the club’s history.

The previously positive fan–player relationship carried over into his new role, resulting in greater understanding and acceptance of his actions. Fans often excused him by blaming other executives for limiting his work:

“He should return to the ideas he had when he arrived here—if he cannot realize them, he should not lend his name to this.” – Interviewee 14

Political Influence

In the Hungarian football league system, the owners of many teams—at the time of data collection, in most cases—were government officials or entrepreneurs who had won public procurement contracts. This was also true for the club examined in the present study. The owner of the analyzed team is also the owner of the company that renovated the club’s facilities using state budget funds. In addition, the city’s pro-government mayor—formerly a member of parliament—selected the club’s management through his personal network. Accordingly, it is not surprising that the theme of political influence appears in fans’ opinions. The situation, as perceived and negatively evaluated by fans, is linked to the owner’s extensive ties to the ruling party and to his practical assignment to own and operate the club. According to fans, the owners’ business activities negatively affect the club’s operation, which they strongly criticized:

“Our owner is a parachutist. He does not even know how he got here—he took a wrong turn.” – Interviewee 15

“...and we know that the owner is a businessman close to the ruling party and how many contracts his construction company receives from the current government.” – Interviewee 22

It is worth noting that opinions on political influence were mainly expressed by interviewees with higher education qualifications. Furthermore, intense criticism in this area was particularly characteristic of fans who no longer attend matches and of older respondents (aged 50 and above).

Lack of Partnership

Edensor (2015) highlights the practical significance of the “fans as the twelfth player,” emphasizing the importance of a partnership relationship between clubs and fans. According to this perspective, fans are not merely passive consumers but active contributors to sporting performance, club identity, and social embeddedness. A sense of partnership strengthens attachment, identification, and loyalty, while its absence may lead to long-term alienation.

The findings of the present study indicate that the partnership between the club and its fans has significantly weakened within the examined community. A large proportion of respondents perceive that their opinions, expectations, and emotional investments are not reflected in the club's decision-making and communication processes, which reinforces the feeling of a lack of cooperation. This process contributes to declining trust and a gradual weakening of commitment to the club.

Based on qualitative analysis, fans opinions can be grouped into two dominant thematic categories. One is "disregard for fans," which emphasizes perceived neglect, one-sided communication, and the club's lack of feedback. The other is "loss of identity," reflecting the marginalization of traditions, the blurring of values, and the weakening of community ties.

The simultaneous presence of these two dimensions suggests that the erosion of partnership cannot be interpreted merely as an organizational or communication problem but also has deeper identity- and emotion-based consequences. For fans, the lack of partnership gradually erodes a sense of belonging to the club, which, in the long run, may manifest as declining match attendance, weakened loyalty, and accelerated alienation.

Disregard for fans refers to the lack of care and openness on the club's side ("they should open up more toward fans" – Interviewee 17) and to the club's ignoring of their presence ("When I see unity breaking down, when they distance themselves from fans" – Interviewee 6).

Another significant issue is the perceived loss of the club's original identity due to frequent rebranding. Fans regard this as the club's responsibility and consider it the primary cause of the deterioration of the partnership between fans and the organization. Fans are proud of their team, its history, and their own commitment, and they expect the same respect from the club, thereby sustaining a shared value system.

In contrast, fans do not feel that the team truly belongs to them. They criticize the management's ties to the capital city and the players' commuting for training, while expecting them to live locally:

"They are in Budapest; they have no idea what this team is." – Interviewee 10

"The club does not value local attachment; there is no identity, they commute from Budapest." – Interviewee 13

These opinions reflect strong emotions, with resentment and hurt being particularly characteristic.

The issue of club identity is closely linked to the city and local values. Fans feel that this important relationship has been lost and that the city has become detached from the club: “The relationship between the team, the fans, and the city has now been broken.” – Interviewee 3

“As long as people not connected to Fehérvár work at the club, there will not be any change.” – Interviewee 12

“We are not happy that, as locals, we see so many people from Budapest working at the club.” – Interviewee 4

Sporting Performance

In their study, Lames and McGarry (2007) define sporting performance as match-related interaction processes and the individual abilities of athletes within teams. The present research has reached similar conclusions: it indicates that team performance serves as a value-measuring tool in fans’ evaluations of the club. Fans opinions generally focus on the team’s success or lack of success, supplemented by perceptions that the team’s performance can at times be ridiculous:

“There were times when, in my anger... during that run of seven defeats, I felt like kicking them all out.” – Interviewee 1

“I could not even single out one match, because we had several terrible home games... what the team produced was depressing.” – Interviewee 23

Based on the results, negative club fans are closely associated with poor sporting performance. This is evident at all levels of match attendance: season ticket holders, occasional spectators, and disengaged fans alike complain about poor performance.

At the same time, the research also shows that a sports club’s success is linked to numerous factors, of which sporting performance is only one component, albeit an important one, according to Havran et al. (2024).

Match-Day Service Quality

Numerous studies demonstrate that the development of fans loyalty is not only related to the quality of matches but is also likely connected to the entertainment value of events, the overall atmosphere, interactions, and services experienced in the stadium (Tomlinson et al., 1995). In the present study, fans dissatisfaction is examined in two main areas.

The first concerns supplementary programs accompanying matches, which are perceived as insufficient and low in quality:

“This is very little—organize something... invite a guy with a guitar... let him sing, so people feel that you actually want something from us.” – Interviewee 5

“There are all kinds of useless programs and stupid things.” – Interviewee 9

The second area generating the most fans comments relates to catering services. Long queues, limited product ranges, high prices, and slow service receive the most criticism:

“It is extremely frustrating that only three out of five food stands are open—I do not believe they can find two more people to run them.” – Interviewee 7

“The catering needs improvement, because the selection is awful... and expensive for what it is.” – Interviewee 10

According to the results, dissatisfaction with services affects overall club perception and contributes to negative evaluations. Service quality influences fans’ emotions: poor service generates considerable dissatisfaction, which may lead to weakened attachment to the club, reduced willingness to attend matches, and, consequently, declining loyalty.

Fans who are firmly committed to their favorite team often encounter situations that conflict with their personal feelings and expectations, leading to decreased interest and a gradual weakening of commitment and attachment (Tinson et al., 2023).

This is a process in which negative experiences may stem from unpredictable sporting results or from sport management changes initiated by the club (Weimar et al., 2022). Preventing situations that lead to negative fans experiences requires continuous vigilance from club management, especially when economic success and competitiveness are priorities. Effective operation requires alignment with the sporting environment and the maximization of economic opportunities in the club’s interest. The study aimed to explore the components of club perception during an unsuccessful period in a football club's life, with the goal of understanding how negative fans evaluations influence identification, attachment, and loyalty. The research addresses these issues by analyzing the consumer behavior of football fans. The findings suggest that negative opinions about the club are closely linked to strong emotional backgrounds, and that emerging dissatisfaction affects match attendance, attachment, and the depth of commitment. According to Singh and Sonnenburg (2012), dissatisfaction related to a brand also raises questions about the responsibility of brand owners. Among fans, abandoning a favorite team is associated with a loss of value, changes in identity, shifts in community relationships, and altered financial and life circumstances (Mahony et al., 2000; Matsuoka et al., 2003).

In this study, one primary source of brand-related dissatisfaction was the club's name and its changes, especially when implemented without prior consultation with fans, which caused significant outrage. In addition, fans dissatisfaction extends to various levels of club management, economic practices, political embeddedness, measures conflicting with fans values, the lack of partnership with fans, weak sporting performance, and low-quality match-day services.

One key conclusion of the research is that a significant cause of fans dissatisfaction lies in controversial club decisions that damage the partnership between the club and its fans, which is based on shared principles and the protection of tradition. This partnership enables football fans, as the "twelfth player" (Edensor, 2015), to feel that their presence matters to the club. Losing this sense of importance and respect can trigger negative emotional processes in individuals and communities, leading to alienation from the club and resistance to management practices.

According to in-depth interviews, fans experience significant disappointment, alienation, and feelings of abandonment when the club's unilateral, self-serving decisions conflict with the traditional values fans defend. Lam (2012) notes that dissatisfaction-related negative emotions may be stronger among those with higher levels of identification. The present study found that regular match-goers perceive the lack of attachment and commitment more strongly than those who attend less frequently or no longer attend.

Given that age also appears to be a relevant factor and that middle-aged and older fans were strongly represented in the sample, the study applied the methodology of Koopman-Boyden and Richardson (2013). The analysis revealed more substantial criticism toward the club among older age groups.

Based on Tinson et al. (2023), reversing negative club perceptions may be supported by reinforcing community solidarity and communicating commitment to tradition. This need was also evident among the fans of the Hungarian football club examined.

Strong negative emotions, frequently observed among respondents, often lead to anger and criticism of club operations, both inside the stadium and on the club's communication platforms. Critical messages are common in these spaces, and fans also say the current situation has reduced their willingness to attend matches.

As emphasized by Sarasvuo et al. (2022), cooperation between fans and clubs can create value. A key conclusion of the study is that fans and clubs are mutually dependent, and joint value creation can support successful cooperation.

Strengthening fans attachment and maintaining loyalty are fundamental interests for clubs, while fans cannot fully express their emotions and identity without the club. According to Schijns et al. (2016), due to the broad availability of sport and intensified competition, sports clubs face increasing pressure to retain existing fans. Service quality has a direct and significant impact on loyalty and becomes an effective management tool for enhancing satisfaction, trust, and commitment. In Hungarian football, however, this is currently only partially realized.

The authoritarian characteristics of the Hungarian state (see Neulinger et al., 2023) contribute to the intense politicization of negative opinions among fans. Accordingly, Hungary's political environment and the intertwining of politics and sport substantially influence fans dissatisfaction. Political conditions fundamentally shape the operation of Hungarian sports clubs and complicate market-based functioning.

At the same time, the ability to operate on a business basis is essential for Hungarian sports enterprises, as dependence on state funding creates uncertainty and undermines professionally grounded decision-making.

IV.2 Quantitative Results

The quantitative analysis of the study presents numerical findings that highlight relationships among different dimensions of identification, loyalty, satisfaction, and identity loss and alienation. Statistical examinations enabled the differentiation of fans groups and the exploration of relationships and differences among variables.

The results presented below directly address the research questions and provide a foundation for subsequent interpretation and conclusions.

IV.2.1 Presentation of the Measurement Scales

Based on the in-depth interview analysis, it can be concluded that match attendance is influenced by several factors. In line with the focus of the present study, seven key factors were identified: cognitive identification, affective identification, evaluative identification, attitudinal loyalty, team satisfaction, team identity deficit (dissatisfaction), and behavioral involvement (loyalty).

These factors were measured by adapting scales widely accepted in the literature. Respondents indicated their level of agreement with statements on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

8. Table: Results of the Principal Component Analysis

	LOADING	KMO	TVE
<i>Cognitive Identification</i>		0,837	80,32%
MOL Fehérvár fans are similar to me.	0,837		
When I talk about MOL Fehérvár, I often say “we” rather than “they.”	0,927		
I am familiar with the history and traditions of MOL Fehérvár.	0,901		
I am familiar with the rituals of the team’s fans.	0,917		
<i>Affective Identification</i>		0,823	79,57%
It bothers me when MOL Fehérvár FC is criticized in the media.	0,907		
I feel sad when MOL Fehérvár FC loses.	0,851		
When someone criticizes MOL Fehérvár, I experience it as a personal insult.	0,907		
When someone praises MOL Fehérvár FC, I feel as if it is directed at me as well.	0,902		
<i>Evaluative Identification</i>		0,623	71,60%
Others have a positive image of MOL Fehérvár FC.	0,851		
Others respect MOL Fehérvár.	0,917		
Most people think that MOL Fehérvár is better than rival teams.	0,763		
<i>Attitudinal Loyalty</i>		0,845	88,87%
I consider myself a committed fans of MOL Fehérvár FC.	0,921		
I would remain a fans even if MOL Fehérvár FC performed poorly.	0,965		
I would still support Fehérvár FC even if my family or friends did not like MOL Fehérvár FC.	0,949		
I am willing to defend MOL Fehérvár FC verbally and in writing during conversations, even if this leads to confrontation with others.	0,935		
<i>Team Satisfaction</i>		0,728	65,10%
The players represent the expectations of fans/the city well.	0,739		
I am satisfied with the relationship between the team and its fans.	0,727		
Overall, I am satisfied with the club’s performance.	0,89		
Overall, I am satisfied with the team’s on-field performance.	0,859		
<i>Team Identity Deficit (Dissatisfaction)</i>		0,623	65,87%
There are too few home-grown players in the team.	0,687		
Hungarian players do not feel the spirit of MOL Fehérvár FC as their own.	0,855		
Foreign players do not feel the spirit of MOL Fehérvár FC as their own.	0,879		
<i>Behavioral Involvement (4-item Scale)</i>		0,761	65,06%
During the season, how often did you follow your team in the following ways:	0,645		
In person	0,857		
On television	0,824		

Through television news or newspapers	0,879		
On the internet / social media		0,714	76,60%
<i>Behavioral Involvement (3-item Scale)</i>	0,86		
During the season, how often did you follow your team in the following ways:	0,838		
On television	0,891		

Source: Author's Own Calculations

Behavioral involvement (loyalty) was examined using two measurement constructs: the first factor comprised four variables, while the second comprised three variables, deliberately excluding the item measuring the frequency of personally following the team. This approach enabled separate examination of loyalty dimensions and exploration of how actual match attendance frequency influences other aspects of fans attachment and attitudinal loyalty.

The questionnaire items were developed with careful consideration of previous research. The survey included questions related to attitudinal loyalty (Biscaia et al., 2012; Doyle et al., 2013; Funk & Pastore, 2000; Gladden & Funk, 2002; Heere & Dickson, 2008; Kaynak et al., 2008; Kunkel et al., 2016; Mahony et al., 2000; Neale & Funk, 2006; Wang et al., 2011), cognitive identification (Dimmock et al., 2005; Heere & James, 2007), affective identification (Dimmock et al., 2005; Heere & James, 2007), evaluative identification (Dimmock et al., 2005), and behavioral involvement (Dimmock et al., 2005; Heere & James, 2007). In addition, items measuring fans satisfaction and dissatisfaction were formulated based on findings from the qualitative study and prior literature.

Regarding the examined component matrices, it can generally be observed that high values are present, which facilitates the interpretation of the results. For example, in the case of cognitive identification and attitudinal loyalty, component matrix values exceeded 0.9. New variables used in the study were created based on the results of principal component analysis (8. Table).

The results of the factor analysis are generally adequate: in all cases, the KMO values exceed 0.5, and the explained variance values are also high. The content of the component matrices is likewise generally appropriate. Only in two cases do component loadings fall below 0.7: for the factors of team identity deficit (dissatisfaction) and behavioral involvement (loyalty), both measured with four variables. However, in the case of identity deficit (dissatisfaction), the lowest loading in the component matrix is close to 0.7 (0.687).

For the behavioral involvement (loyalty) factor measured with four variables, the lowest loading is 0.645. Taking this into account, an additional indicator based on three variables was calculated after excluding the item with the lowest loading. It is worth noting that the omitted variable measured how often respondents attended matches in person to support the team. Given that one of the research questions specifically examines match attendance, it is justified to analyze behavioral involvement (loyalty) factors jointly. The correlations among the new variables derived from the principal component analysis are presented in Appendix 2.

IV.2.2 Formation of Fans Segments

Regarding territorial attachment, Collins et al. (2016) highlighted the relationship between community formation and individuals' place of residence (city, state, nation). According to their view, people believe that their team represents this broader community.

With respect to geographical fan affiliation, Heere and James (2007) identify geographical categories as one type of out-group identity and emphasize the relationship between fans communities and cities, as well as their emotional and value-based significance for individuals. One important tool in this process is the inclusion of city names in team names. In their view, the geographical anchor of a team is so strong for fans that if individuals were to detach from their team, they would also detach from their hometown (state or nation).

The results of the present study likewise indicate that a given city (Székesfehérvár) is well known among locals. That attachment to the local team is reinforced by attachment to the city itself. Based on the qualitative in-depth interviews, it was clearly observable that attachment to the team is related to attachment to the city and to urban sport.

In addition, research on sports ecosystems represents a relatively new topic in literature (Buser et al., 2022). From their perspective, sports ecosystems encompass all actors connected to the sporting environment. Taking these considerations into account, the cluster analysis based on attachment to the city and to urban sport is justified in the present dissertation.

To segment fans, hierarchical cluster analysis (using Ward's method and squared Euclidean distance) was applied. Based on the dendrogram, four groups were identified (Appendix 3).

9. Table: Cluster averages

	Non-native residents	Native locals	Distant fan	Non-attached fans
Székesfehérvár means a lot to me.	6,73	6,79	4,85	1,78
I envision my future in connection with Székesfehérvár.	6,29	6,64	2,69	1,25
<i>I am interested in the sports life of Székesfehérvár.</i>	5,93	6,36	5,04	2,56
My family has a traditional connection to football in Székesfehérvár (as fans or in other ways).	2,95	6,45	3,93	1,09
I am interested in professional football in Székesfehérvár.	4,87	6,79	6,24	1,75
Sample size	N=55	N=42	N=62	N=32

Source: Author's Own Calculations

The four clusters can be characterized by their within-cluster means, as summarized in 6. Table: The definition of the four clusters is related to the average values of the variables within each group.

Among native local fans, the average values of the variables are high, indicating a strong attachment to the city and local football. The non-native fans group shows nearly identical results; however, the average value of the variable reflecting family attachment is exceptionally low in this group, which explains the label assigned to it. In contrast, in the group of distant fans, the values of variables related to attachment are relatively low. The lowest values for attachment-related variables are observed in the unattached fans group.

The average values of the variables within the groups illustrate differences among fans and thus demonstrate the sample's segment ability (Table 9).

The results of the cluster analysis indicate that attachment to the city and local sport significantly influences fans identity and commitment to the club. Differences across groups indicate that territorial attachment is not merely a demographic factor but also a key determinant of emotional ties to the sports brand.

This supports the view that, in clubs' marketing and community-building strategies, the conscious reinforcement of local identity and attachment to the city can play a crucial role in maintaining long-term loyalty. These relationships are further explored in subsequent quantitative analyses through a detailed examination of fans identification and loyalty, as well as the dimensions of emotional attachment to the club and the city.

IV.2.3 Comparison of Fans Segments

To examine differences between clusters, ANOVA was applied to variables not included in the cluster analysis (i.e., the factors).

10. Table: Results of the ANOVA Analysis

	F	p-érték
Cognitive Identification	38,871	<001
Affective Identification	28,762	<001
Evaluative Identification	1,011	0,389
Attitudinal Loyalty	48,744	<001
Team Satisfaction	1,264	0,288
Team Identity Deficit (Dissatisfaction)	7,505	<001
Behavioral Involvement (4-item Scale)	52,469	<001
Behavioral Involvement (3-item Scale)	48,279	<001

Source: Author's Own Calculations

The topic of dissatisfaction is of particular importance in this dissertation, as reflected in the analysis, which shows that different items are associated with the dissatisfaction and satisfaction factors. Based on the ANOVA results, it can be concluded that, except for evaluative identification and satisfaction, there are significant differences among the clusters for all factors (Table 10).

11. Table: Mean Values of the Factors Across Clusters

	Cognitive Identification	Affective Identification	Evaluative Identification	Attitudinal Loyalty	Team Satisfaction	Team Identity Deficit (Dissatisfaction)	Behavioral Involvement (4-item Scale)	Behavioral Involvement (3-item Scale)
Non-native locals	-0,0550	-0,1313	0,1153	-0,0175	-0,0273	0,0737	-0,1010	-0,0717
Native locals	0,6649	0,6273	0,1242	0,6848	-0,0885	0,4041	0,7759	0,6803
Distant fans	0,2466	0,2571	0,0870	0,2561	-0,0753	-0,0069	0,2530	0,2962
Unattached fans	-1,2559	-1,0957	-0,1924	-1,3648	0,3089	-0,6437	-1,3349	1,3436

Source: Author's Own Calculations

The mean values of the factors across clusters are presented in Table 11. Table. Based on the results, it can be concluded that fans with stronger identification and higher loyalty are more dissatisfied. In the native local fans group, the cluster with the highest mean for identification variables, while the satisfaction variable has the lowest mean in this segment. In addition, this group also shows high mean values for attitudinal loyalty and behavioral involvement, as well as low levels of dissatisfaction related to team identity deficit.

Differences among clusters are also illustrated by the following boxplots, shown in Appendix 5. The quantitative methodological findings are consistent with the qualitative results, as the relationship between dissatisfaction and fans attachment is evident in both approaches.

IV.3 Answers to the Research Questions

Based on the qualitative and quantitative findings, the research questions could be answered. The dissertation primarily presents a qualitatively focused study, which also incorporates quantitative results in certain sections. The following section provides a detailed presentation of the answers to the research questions.

Research Question 1: What Factors Influence Match Attendance? (What Is the Background and Scientific Explanation for Low Attendance Figures?)

The factors influencing match attendance span a vast spectrum. The study examined this topic using both qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches, resulting in the identification of numerous influencing factors.

Based on the qualitative findings, the following factors are particularly important: club traditions, past achievements, and previously realized values. According to the results, declining match attendance may be related to the lack of alignment between values that support fans identification and those perceived in the club's current value system. This absence of value congruence affects fans' willingness to attend matches.

This process also influences sporting success, which may further deepen fans alienation and, in turn, negatively affect match attendance. Emotional consequences, including weakened attachment, accompany alienation. Using quantitative methods, the study examined the relationships between personal match attendance and several other indicators.

Differences were identified across various categories of match attendance in relation to cognitive identification, affective identification, evaluative identification, attitudinal loyalty, satisfaction, and dissatisfaction (12. Table).

12. Table: ANOVA Results Related to Match Attendance

	F	p-érték
Cognitive Identification	38,871	<001
Affective Identification	19,151	<001
Evaluative Identification	1,592	0,152
Attitudinal Loyalty	19,992	<001
Team Satisfaction	0,572	0,753
Team Identity Deficit (Dissatisfaction)	1,772	0,107

Source: Author's Own Calculations

Based on the results presented in 12. Table: It can be concluded that there are significant differences in cognitive and affective identification, as well as attitudinal loyalty, across different levels of match attendance. In contrast, the findings indicate that there are no significant differences in fans satisfaction and dissatisfaction or in evaluative identification across the different categories of match attendance. Differences observed in cognitive, affective, and evaluative identification are illustrated in Appendix 4. Based on the figure presented there, it can be concluded that match attendance is more frequent among fans with higher levels of cognitive and affective identification. In the boxplots, for the category corresponding to a value of 1 for match attendance, the values between the lower and upper quartiles are negative in both figures. In contrast, in the other attendance groups, the upper quartile values of identification are positive. Several findings by Bodon et al. (2023) are also relevant to this research question. Their results indicate that higher levels of fans identification and attitudinal loyalty positively affect spectator consumption, particularly personal attendance at football matches. At the same time, Bodon et al. (2023) also highlight a specific situation in football in which the role and necessity of fans have become marginalized.

Research Question 2: How Does Club Perception Influence Fans Attachment?

This research question was examined using a qualitative methodological approach. Club perception is closely related to how fans perceive the effects of the club's activities.

The loss of a sense of importance and the lack of perceived respect can trigger negative emotional processes among individual fans and within the fans community, leading to alienation from the club and resistance to management practices. The findings indicate that negative opinions about the club are firmly emotionally grounded, which affects attachment to the club and the depth of commitment. One key conclusion of the dissertation is that a significant source of fans dissatisfaction is the damage caused by questionable club decisions to the club-fan relationship. This partnership is based on shared principles and the protection of tradition and enables football fans, as the “twelfth player” (Edensor, 2015), to feel that their presence matters to the club.

According to the in-depth interviews, fans experience considerable disappointment, alienation, and feelings of abandonment when management’s unilateral, self-serving decisions conflict with the traditional club values they defend. Strong negative emotions, frequently observed among interviewees, lead to anger and to criticism of club operations, both inside the stadium and on the club’s communication platforms.

Research Question 3: How Does Fans Satisfaction Influence Attachment to a Football Team?

This research question was examined using a hybrid methodological approach. During the in-depth interviews conducted in the first phase of the study, satisfaction was examined indirectly rather than explicitly. This was partly because the primary focus was on attachment and match attendance, partly because satisfaction and attachment are closely related, and partly because content analysis gradually brought satisfaction—and especially dissatisfaction—into focus as one of the most important factors influencing match attendance.

Further investigation of dissatisfaction led to an expanded analysis of alienation and match attendance, which represents one of the most important theoretical contributions of this dissertation. Numerous studies show that fans loyalty is not only related to sporting quality but also to the entertainment value of events and the general atmosphere, interactions, and services experienced in the stadium (Tomlinson et al., 1995). In this study, dissatisfaction with services focused primarily on two areas: supplementary match-day programs and catering services.

Fans perceived accompanying programs as insufficient and low in quality:

“This is very little—organize something... invite a guy with a guitar... let him sing, so people feel that you actually want something from us.” – Interviewee 5

“There are all kinds of useless programs and stupid things.” – Interviewee 9

The most frequent comments concerned catering services, including long queues, limited product ranges, high prices, and slow service:

“It is extremely frustrating that only three out of five food stands are open.” – Interviewee 7

“The catering needs improvement, because the selection is awful... and expensive.” – Interviewee 10

In the quantitative analysis, fans attachment was measured using attitudinal and behavioral loyalty indicators. Since fans satisfaction could also be measured using survey data, the research question was examined through correlations between satisfaction and loyalty indicators (3. Appendix).

The results indicate that satisfaction does not correlate significantly with either attitudinal or behavioral loyalty. This finding is somewhat surprising, as a relationship between satisfaction and attitudinal loyalty could reasonably have been expected. However, the specific research context—characterized by general dissatisfaction with the club—may explain this deviation from theoretical expectations.

Research Question 4: What Role Does the Fans Community Play in Shaping Individual Attachment/Alienation, Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction, Identification/Detachment, and Club Perception and Identity?

This research question was examined primarily through qualitative methods, using content analysis of fans interviews. Previous studies suggest that being a sports fan represents a specific form of social identity (Rees et al., 2015) and that attachment to the fans community can be a significant determinant of loyalty (Yoshida et al., 2015). Heere and James (2007) also emphasize the symbolic power of sports teams in expressing social identity. Accordingly, belonging to a fans community is likely to influence individual identification. The present study reached similar conclusions. Most respondents expressed negative views about the examined club, particularly criticizing the neglect of community building:

“The failure to expand the fan base is a complete joke.” – Interviewee 10
“They should try harder to attract spectators.” – Interviewee 17

Some interviewees also emphasized the community-level impact of negative decisions: “Incomprehensible decisions irritate the community.” – Interviewee 18

Furthermore, previous research suggests that reinforcing community solidarity and commitment to tradition may help reverse negative perceptions (Tinson et al., 2023), a need that also emerged among fans in this study.

Fans communities are linked to place of residence and birthplace (Collins et al., 2016), and geographical affiliation represents a key form of social identity (Heere & James, 2007). In the quantitative analysis, four clusters were identified based on attachment to the city. One of these consisted of “native local” fans, who showed the highest levels of cognitive and emotional identification. This finding reinforces the qualitative results regarding the relationship between community belonging and individual fans identification (9. Table).

Research Question 5: How Does Club Identity Influence Fans Attachment, Satisfaction, and Identification with the Team?

This research question was addressed using a hybrid analytical approach. The findings indicate that frequent rebranding has led to the loss of the club’s original identity, which fans regard as the club’s responsibility. This process negatively affects the partnership between the club and its fans. Because fans no longer feel that the team truly belongs to them, strong emotions—particularly resentment and hurt—emerge, influencing fans attachment, identification, and satisfaction: “They are in Budapest; they have no idea what this team is.” – Interviewee 10

“The club does not value local attachment; there is no identity, they commute from Budapest.” – Interviewee 13

In the quantitative analysis, club and team identity can be considered closely related concepts in relation to fans attachment, identification, and satisfaction. The dissatisfaction variable used in the analysis reflects a deficit in team identity. In addition, several indicators of identification (cognitive, affective, and evaluative) and satisfaction were calculated from the survey data, while attitudinal loyalty served as an indicator of fans attachment.

It is important to emphasize that satisfaction and dissatisfaction (team identity deficit, which differs from fans identity deficit) were measured using different questionnaire items. The research question was examined by correlating the dissatisfaction variable with other indicators of satisfaction, identification, and attitudinal loyalty (2. Appendix).

The present research is also related to the findings of Bodon and Neulinger (2025), which suggest that the breakdown of partnership between clubs and fans can substantially influence attachment, loyalty, identity, perceptions of the club, and fans' views on club identity.

Research Question 6: How Does Fans Attachment to a Football Team Develop During Periods of Negative Emotions?

This research question was examined using qualitative methods. In the analysis, it is important to distinguish between sources of negative emotions. While neutral situations and life events may elicit less intense emotional responses, the perception that club management has violated the “implicit contract” between fans and the team can provoke intense negative emotions.

In the present study, predominantly negative fans emotions were observed, partly related to brand name changes (e.g., changes in the team’s name). Many fans expressed anger when describing themselves as “belonging but not attached.” Repeated disappointments altered their level of commitment, as club operations and experienced outcomes failed to meet expectations, generating frustration:

“We sacrifice our free time for them, and often do not fully enjoy it.” – Interviewee 3

This process also intensified alienation: “I do not go anymore because they are uninteresting.” – Interviewee 5

At the same time, one of the distinctive features of fandom is that, despite numerous negative emotions and disappointments, the foundations of fans identity often remain: “I cannot hate them so much that I stop caring.” – Interviewee 12

This research question is also related to findings by Bodon (2025), which address the business implications of negative emotions and demonstrate how such emotions contribute to the gradual weakening of fans loyalty.

Research Question 7: How Can the Process of Alienation Be Described through an Extension of the PCM Model?

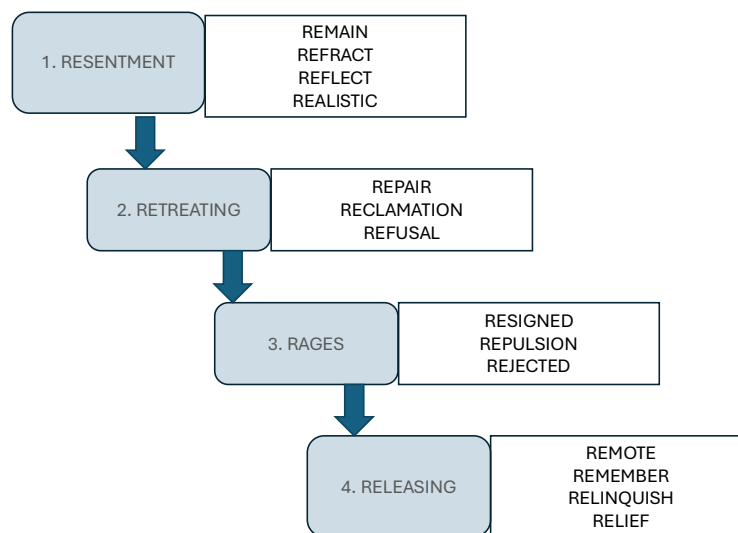
Based on the findings presented so far, it has become clear that alongside fans attachment, a gradual process of alienation can also be identified. This process requires a structured interpretation to understand the mechanisms by which attachment weakens and how this leads to declining match attendance.

The analysis revealed interconnected stages of alienation, enabling the development of a new model as an extension of the PCM (Funk & James, 2001). The empirical foundation of this model is supported by previous research findings and by the conclusions of Bodon (2025), which are organically integrated into the theoretical and empirical framework of the dissertation.

Although the PCM describes the developmental process of attachment in detail, modeling the weakening of attachment remains an underexplored area in the sport management literature. The present study focuses on the role of negative emotions in the alienation process and also examines its economic consequences.

Based on the qualitative analysis, a four-stage model of alienation emerged: resentment, withdrawal, anger, and letting go. The findings demonstrate that fans attachment can not only strengthen but may also gradually weaken on an emotional basis. The study connects to previous literature on disidentification, which conceptualizes levels of fan disengagement, and on which the stages of fans detachment are based (12. Figure)

12. Figure: Stages of Fans Detachment



Source: Author's Own Compilation

The disengagement process described by Becker and Tausch (2014) corresponds in several respects to the stages of resentment and anger, in which dissatisfaction and anger—as basic emotions (Ekman & Cordaro, 2011)—play a prominent role. In the final phase of the model, disengagement manifests as letting go.

Research on identification primarily draws on identity and social identity theories (Lock & Heere, 2017), while the meaning of a team is also connected to place, past, and present (Delia & James, 2018). The development of identification does not depend exclusively on success (Lock et al., 2011), a finding also confirmed by the qualitative results of the present study. The analysis focuses on the typical process of weakening attachment accompanied by negative emotions, while also allowing for individual variation.

This study extends the existing literature by providing a more detailed exploration of emotional states associated with the dissolution of attachment. The sequence of emotional stages cannot be regarded as fixed in all cases; therefore, the results are presented in the following subsections.

Stage 1 – Resentment

The first stage of alienation is resentment, which corresponds to the fourth level of the PCM and signals the beginning of weakening attachment. In this phase, fans remain active participants in club life and regularly attend matches, but their emotional involvement declines, and identification becomes less central.

Several factors, including distancing from the community, negative club-related experiences, life changes, or a gradual loss of interest, may trigger this stage. The process often begins unnoticed, yet it marks the start of progressive detachment. This phenomenon is related to the concept of disidentification (Becker & Tausch, 2014), particularly its dissatisfaction component. Interview data indicate that weakening attachment is primarily linked not to the fans community but to negative emotions associated with club operations.

Stage 2 – Retreating

In the second stage, fans remain attached to the club, but identification weakens, and critical remarks and complaints become more frequent. This phase represents a transition between cognitively based distancing and stronger emotional reactions.

Withdrawal signals the beginning of emotional detachment and is accompanied by persistent dissatisfaction, social withdrawal, and the emergence of alternative interests. According to the in-depth interviews, this stage marks the first appearance of conscious distancing.

Stage 3 – Rages

The third stage is characterized by intense anger and frustration, which emerge as fundamental emotions (Ekman & Cordaro, 2011). At this point, fans are no longer able to identify with the club, disappointments accumulate, and the situation is perceived as unsolvable.

Anger is often accompanied by disgust, disillusionment, and emotional exhaustion, further reinforcing detachment. Distrust in club operations and continuous negative experiences reach their peak in this phase.

Stage 4 – Releasing

In the final stage, fans become emotionally detached from the club, their interest declines significantly, and match attendance becomes infrequent. The relationship is maintained mainly through memories and nostalgic experiences.

Feelings of resignation and relief emerge, and following the club becomes passive. Attachment does not necessarily disappear altogether, but it no longer constitutes a defining element of fans identity. Nostalgia plays a vital role at this stage (Gordon, 2013).

IV.4 Reflections and Future Directions

With the completion of the research, it becomes possible to place the study's results in a broader context and identify potential directions for future development. The empirical investigation presented in this dissertation revealed numerous insights into Hungarian football fans' opinions, perceptions of clubs, loyalty, and identification. However, the interpretation of these findings cannot be complete without considering the study's limitations and potential practical applications.

Beyond the results presented in this dissertation, further conclusions can be drawn to improve club management, particularly in relation to fans relations and community building. The complex examination of fans behavior, emotional attachment, and subsequent alienation raised several additional questions that may serve as the foundation for future research projects.

It is important to emphasize that, although the study aimed to provide comprehensive findings, its validity remains limited. Awareness of these limitations enables critical evaluation and strengthens the scientific credibility of the research.

The following section discusses in detail possible directions for further research, practically relevant management recommendations, and the constraints encountered during the study.

IV.4.1 Future Research Directions

The completion of this dissertation does not signify the end of the research, as the study focused on a narrowly defined research problem. Beyond the research presented here, further studies have been made possible by the parallel collection of additional empirical data alongside the qualitative investigation. Within this framework, ten in-depth interviews were conducted with local fans in each of three cities—Debrecen, Miskolc, and Zalaegerszeg—using the same interview guide applied in this dissertation.

This qualitative research aimed to explore similarities and differences in the attitudes, preferences, and perceptions of fans from geographically and culturally diverse football environments. Identifying these similarities and differences may help outline a more general pattern of provincial fans thinking and thus support a deeper understanding of the domestic fan base.

Following the favorable reception of the quantitative questionnaire and growing scholarly interest, a nationwide survey was conducted in 2023 to facilitate further research beyond the dissertation. This survey focused on fans of NB I and NB II football clubs and used the methodology and questionnaire from the Székesfehérvár study presented in this dissertation.

A distinctive feature of the study was that data collection took place during the final eight rounds of the championship season, allowing fans to reflect on their relationship with their club in light of seasonal developments and to express their level of satisfaction. Access to the questionnaire was promoted through national sports portals, approximately 7,000 flyers distributed before home matches of NB I teams, and an intensive individual Facebook campaign. As a result, 819 fans completed the survey.

One of the most important outcomes of this study was its contribution to a more precise understanding of fans alienation and to the preparation of new academic publications. The literature review also revealed growing interest within the academic community in replicable studies whose results can be compared longitudinally. This recognition motivated the launch of another nationwide survey in April 2025, focusing on NB I and NB II fans. This survey largely mirrors the 2023 study's thematic focus and methodology and further supports research beyond the dissertation.

An important innovation of the 2025 study was the inclusion of a dedicated section on categorizing negative fans emotions. This enabled the quantitative testing of qualitative findings presented in Bodon and Neulinger's (2024) conference paper, "*The Marketing Value of Negative Emotions: Partial Results of a Qualitative Study of a Hungarian Football Club*," submitted to the EMOK conference.

The 2025 survey was promoted through fans community forums, Facebook communication, and approximately 8,000 flyers distributed in person before home matches across the country. This resulted in 603 completed questionnaires. As the championship season has only recently concluded, the research is currently awaiting the data processing phase.

The study offers opportunities to review earlier published findings, confirm or refute existing scholarly contributions, and conduct longitudinal analyses. Although data cleaning and preliminary analyses have not yet begun, data collection has been completed and provides a solid foundation for continuing the research and producing further academic publications.

The present study focuses on the process of declining emotion-based fans commitment. Future research may seek to integrate the full spectrum of emotions into a comprehensive model describing the gradual weakening of commitment to sports teams.

IV.4.2 Scholarly Contribution of the Dissertation

Although Hungarian academic literature has addressed attendance-related problems in domestic football leagues, the novelty of this dissertation lies in its examination of the phenomenon through the analysis of fans' opinions and experiences. Using the case of MOL Fehérvár FC, the empirical investigation is among the first to present, within the specific context of Hungarian football, the interrelationships among club perception, stadium experience, political influence, and fans identity, thereby offering findings relevant at an international level.

The research addresses a relatively underexplored area in both national and international scholarships. It provides the first comprehensive qualitative and quantitative analysis of declining attendance and perceptions of clubs in the Hungarian football context. This approach enables the identification of emotional, identity-related, and trust-based factors underlying declining attendance, which have previously played only a marginal role in domestic sport marketing and sport economics discourse.

One of the most important scholarly contributions of the dissertation is its extension of fans behavior research to the largely unexplored processes of alienation. The study develops the Psychological Continuum Model by applying it not only to the strengthening of commitment but also to the gradual weakening and dissolution of loyalty. Beyond examining the positive processes of loyalty and identification that have dominated research for decades, this dissertation also explores, analyzes, and models the mechanisms of fans alienation, thereby filling a significant research gap that has received limited attention in sport marketing and sport economics research.

Sport consumer behavior, brand loyalty, and emotional attachment have been widely studied over the past few decades. However, existing literature typically examines these dimensions separately.

Classical approaches to brand loyalty (e.g., Funk & James, 2001; Bee & Havitz, 2010) primarily focus on behavioral and attitudinal aspects, while emotional attachment and alienation are more often addressed from the perspective of fans identity (Madrigal, 2008; Yoshida et al., 2015). The novelty of the present study lies in its integrated theoretical framework, which examines the interrelationships among these factors with particular emphasis on the emotional and loyalty-related dynamics of sports brands. The research gap addressed in this dissertation concerns the relationship between emotional alienation and the behavioral aspect of brand loyalty (match attendance), which has only been partially explored in prior research. Beyond studying alienation, the dissertation's key theoretical contribution is its integrated analysis of the emotional and loyalty-related components of the sport consumption experience. This provides a new interpretive framework for sport marketing to strengthen fans commitment and brand relationships. By introducing and applying the concepts of fans co-creation and the "invisible contract" to Hungarian football, the dissertation demonstrates how implicit expectation systems operate between clubs and fans. This highlights the importance of fan participation, underscores the need to build strong club-fans relationships, and emphasizes distancing as a significant and ongoing phenomenon. In doing so, it offers a novel theoretical framework for interpreting fans relationships. Through this approach, the analysis presented in the dissertation offers a new sport-specific interpretation that contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of fans behavior. It also highlights conceptual and structural problems in Hungarian football. It emphasizes the importance of integrating and strengthening sport marketing as a discipline in the operation of football clubs and sports enterprises. The dissertation's interdisciplinary perspective and its methodological innovation, grounded in student participation, further enhances its value by simultaneously expanding theoretical discourse in sport marketing and providing practical, management-oriented recommendations. *The Dissertation's Main Theoretical Contributions to Literature:*

1. Examining how the concept of alienation fits into the relationship system between fans and clubs.
2. Analyzing how fans' perceptions of changes in the "invisible contract" between the community and the club affect club perception.
3. Investigating the effects of changes in club identity on fans emotions, attachment, identification, and satisfaction.
4. Reinforcing the economic role and importance of sport marketing as a scientific field.
5. Examining the impact of negative fans emotions on match attendance.

IV.4.3 Management Recommendations

Several practical conclusions can be drawn from this research. Given the high costs associated with professional sports, teams and sports organizations must attract new consumers while simultaneously transforming existing customers into loyal fans (Kunkel et al., 2016). Kotler and Keller (2003) have already pointed out that acquiring new customers may be more costly than retaining existing ones. One of the most important recommendations for practitioners is to address the dissatisfaction of fans and fans groups showing signs of weakening attachment. Due to strong emotional ties to nostalgia and the past (Gordon, 2013), it is more cost-effective to expand the fans base by reversing alienation and reclaiming lost market segments than by recruiting entirely new fans.

Re-establishing contact with alienated fans may help restart the attachment process, allowing renewed loyalty to build upon previously established but damaged fans identities. Accordingly, the findings highlight the need for specialized marketing strategies tailored to this group. The results support segmenting fans groups, enabling targeted communication. Fans segmentation offers clear advantages in terms of cost efficiency and effectiveness, as fans with shorter, less intense histories of dissatisfaction may require different communication approaches to restore previous levels of attachment than highly angry, deeply detached former fans.

Re-engaging alienated fans can help rebuild a solid fan base in the stands, enhancing the club's economic value and improving the match-day experience through shared value creation. This may, in turn, contribute to improved player performance and long-term club success, further strengthening economic value. The research also indicates the need for change to restore the deteriorating partnership between the club and its fans. Conclusions drawn from fans' opinions point toward creative planning as a pathway to solutions. Developing concrete intervention strategies may therefore represent an important direction for future research.

IV.4.4 Limitations of the Study

Naturally, this research has several limitations. It is important to emphasize that declining fans' commitment may have multiple causes, some of which are related to apathy and neutral emotions, such as when fans reorganize their interests due to personal life events. One major limitation is that the analysis focuses primarily on football in Székesfehérvár, which provided an excellent opportunity to examine declining fans' commitment.

However, the study is based on the opinions of fans of only one Hungarian football club. Consequently, it remains uncertain to what extent the findings can be generalized to fans of other clubs and/or leagues in different countries. The research did not examine transitions between different stages of declining commitment, and the conclusions are based mainly on interviews with predominantly male fans. During the in-depth interviews, alongside psychological attachment, numerous negative statements about the club were expressed, often accompanied by strong emotions, dissatisfaction, and criticism. According to Cohen et al. (2017), individuals identify with organizations when those organizations represent values that align with their self-concept. In this case, the club's nostalgic traditions and past values appear particularly important to fans (Gordon, 2013). These are the values with which fans identify, and their frustration stems from the perceived lack of value congruence in the present. Negative signals indicate strong opposition to the club's operations, potentially leading to alienation among fans. The findings suggest that even when clubs attempt to communicate, introduce, or legitimize decisions and events in their own way, the absence of fans involvement and actions perceived as contrary to tradition often elicit negative, resistant reactions. This opposition and alienation may eventually affect sporting performance, further deepening the negative relationship between the club and its environment.

Sources of negative perceptions include perceived wastefulness and corruption in club management, poor team performance, and unfavorable views of the main sponsor. These factors contribute to declining attendance and sparsely populated stands, where only the most committed fans remain consistently present, while those with weaker attachment gradually drop out. Harris and Ogbonna (2008) emphasize that psychological attachment is important because it constitutes a prerequisite for loyalty. It should also be noted that fans alienation may arise from multiple causes, including apathy and neutral emotions, such as when personal life events lead to changes in individual value systems. This study focuses specifically on emotionally driven alienation. Future research may seek to integrate the full spectrum of emotions into a model describing the alienation process from sports teams. Another limitation is that the study examines negative fans perceptions and their consequences in the context of a Central and Eastern European football club. The focus on periods of poor performance and negative evaluation represents an under-researched area in the literature. Nevertheless, due to the universal nature of sport, even single-case studies may provide valuable insights for clubs in other countries and sports.

As negative changes in club–fans partnerships are becoming increasingly common in sport (Anaza et al., 2021), analyzing the views of fans of a single club can still contribute to a better understanding of this phenomenon. A further limitation lies in the qualitative methodology employed. While it does not allow for statistical generalization, it enables in-depth understanding and contributes to improving fans relations and value co-creation. In this study, frequent match attendees remained loyal primarily because of their attachment to the club’s past and local identity. In contrast, among occasional attendees and disengaged fans, weak attachment or negative emotions hindered the development of loyalty. The research highlighted operational shortcomings from the fans’ perspective and clarified the relationship between match attendance and attachment. The qualitative methodology provided deeper insight but does not support population-wide quantitative conclusions. Moreover, the analysis of alienation processes relies on respondents’ recollections, which may be affected by subjective perceptions and retrospective bias. Additionally, the sample consisted mainly of highly committed fans who volunteered and were active on fans forums. These individuals either maintain a strong attachment or have had one in the past. This sampling characteristic limits representativeness.

Future research may explore whether other football clubs in Hungary also face identity crises despite—or because of—substantial financial support, and whether clubs truly require active fans bases in the contemporary sports environment.

To enhance generalizability, further data collection is needed, particularly among fans of other football clubs and in other spectator sports.

V. SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

The primary focus of this dissertation is on match attendance and the factors influencing spectator numbers, as declining attendance has been a fundamental problem for Hungarian league football in recent years. The research examines the full spectrum of fan attachment, ranging from satisfaction-related strengthening of commitment to the weakening of emotional bonds through processes of dissatisfaction and alienation. The findings indicate that fan attachment is closely linked to fans identity. One of the main results of the dissertation is that declining match attendance is strongly associated with loss of fans identity, which is also connected to deficiencies in club identity.

The football club examined in this study (known as MOL Fehérvár FC during the research period) proved to be a suitable case, as it had experienced prolonged underperformance, declining results, decreasing attendance, and persistent fan dissatisfaction.

The research sought to identify the factors influencing attendance at MOL Fehérvár FC matches, explore general fan motivations for attending football events, and examine the main barriers to match attendance within the local community. These factors are closely related to fan emotions; therefore, the analysis placed particular emphasis on emotional attachment, as it significantly affects fans' willingness to attend matches.

Fans identity is strongly connected to attachment to the city. A distinctive feature of the study is that MOL Fehérvár FC represents a major regional football center in the top division, embedded in a geographically well-defined community. Consequently, the club's local environment and traditions are closely linked to the city. Accordingly, special attention was devoted to examining the relationship between the city and the club from the fans' perspective, including the role of local authorities, visible forms of cooperation, existing problems, and proposed solutions.

The fans community forms around the club and plays a crucial role in shaping fan behavior. The research examined local interpersonal relationships and social bonds to understand how community existence influences match attendance and the degree to which collective experiences shape identification with the club.

Fan attachment constitutes an emotional bond (Biscaia et al., 2012; Mahony et al., 2000), while its dissolution represents the breakdown of this bond. In the sports context, where team affiliation often becomes integrated into personal identity (Rees et al., 2015), this relationship can be interpreted as an "invisible contract" (Middling et al., 2025). The weakening of attachment, therefore, corresponds to the gradual erosion of this contract. However, it is important to distinguish between different causes of emotional disengagement. Neutral life events may evoke less intense emotions, whereas perceived violations of this implicit agreement by club management may trigger strong adverse emotional reactions.

Previous research has emphasized the role of the sport ecosystem in sport management (Buser et al., 2022). The present findings similarly suggest that the club's organizational environment, particularly its management practices, significantly influences fans' emotions, loyalty, and attachment.

Negative emotional experiences may ultimately lead fans to disengage from the club. One of the main contributions of this dissertation is the comprehensive modeling of this process.

Unlike traditional marketing contexts, football spectators contribute value not only through ticket purchases but also through their physical presence and emotional engagement.

Edensor (2015) highlighted the importance of the “fans as the twelfth player,” emphasizing the partnership between clubs and fans. Violations of this partnership may hinder both sporting and economic performance. Fans, fan groups, and clubs can jointly create value through shared experiences (Sarasvuo et al., 2022). However, this relationship is inherently unstable, as sporting failures may undermine fan commitment and eventually lead to disengagement. Fan dissatisfaction may thus have substantial economic consequences by reducing attendance and operational efficiency.

The study focuses on the weakening of fan commitment and investigates the role of negative emotions and critical attitudes in shaping fans behavior. Although recent marketing literature has begun to address the termination of consumer identification (e.g., Anaza et al., 2021), research in the sports context remains limited. This dissertation aims to address this gap.

The research contributes to existing literature in several ways. The research questions relate to both dissatisfaction with football clubs and the dissolution of fan attachment, but they are examined within a novel analytical framework. While dissatisfaction has been widely studied in service marketing, its club application–fans relationships remain underdeveloped.

Fan alienation is a particularly under-researched phenomenon, as most studies focus on attracting new fans. This dissertation extends existing knowledge by analyzing the effects of negative emotions in spectator sports, where social identity plays a stronger role in shaping attitudes and behavior than in conventional consumer contexts.

Although Yi and Baumgartner (2004) found that angry consumers tend to adopt confrontational coping strategies, this also applies to sports fans; other coping mechanisms, such as acceptance and positive reappraisal, are less common among fans. Therefore, general consumer behavior models are only partially applicable to sports contexts.

This study examines the process of fan disengagement, emphasizing the role of social identity in shaping attitudes and behavior. It aims to capture a wide range of life situations in which negative emotions may weaken fan attachment.

Reconnecting with alienated fans can help restart the attachment process, rebuilding engagement on previously established but damaged fan identities. A significant contribution of the dissertation is the extension of the Psychological Continuum Model (Funk & James, 2001). While the original framework outlines stages of awareness, attraction, attachment, and loyalty, this research identifies corresponding stages of disengagement: resentment, withdrawal, anger, and release. Intense negative emotions accompany the dissolution of attachment and reflect the deterioration of the club–fans partnership.

An in-depth case study approach was applied, allowing for context-sensitive analysis of complex phenomena. According to Yin (2009), case-based research supports the development of new theoretical frameworks, further justifying this methodological choice.

Although neutral emotions may also occur during disengagement, qualitative findings indicate a predominance of negative emotions, particularly related to rebranding and club management practices. These results highlight the substantial impact of organizational decisions on fan loyalty and emotional attachment.

By introducing a new analytical framework for dissatisfaction and disengagement, the dissertation contributes to sport marketing literature. The identified emotional patterns and stages of alienation refine existing disidentification models and extend the Psychological Continuum Model. The findings demonstrate that negative emotions operate differently in spectator sports than in general consumer environments due to the central role of social identity. Unlike traditional commitment models, the proposed framework emphasizes that attachment rarely disappears completely but often persists in nostalgic form. From a practical perspective, re-engaging alienated fans represents a cost-effective strategy.

Targeted marketing initiatives based on weakened attachment can strengthen fan bases and enhance club value. Football is more than a sport; it is a community experience, a source of identity, and an emotional space. The relationship between clubs and fans extends beyond transactional exchanges and constitutes a deep social contract. Recognizing and nurturing this relationship is essential for maintaining community embeddedness and reactivating former audiences.

The findings support segmenting fans and developing targeted communication strategies. Despite repeated warnings and research-based recommendations during the study period, meaningful responses from club ownership, management, and local authorities were largely absent. Although fan relationship management represents a complex sporting and managerial challenge, neglecting it has serious consequences. By the end of the examined period, the club had been relegated from the top division.

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Botos István: A Videoton labdarúgó krónikája, 1941-1991. A Vadásztölténygyári csapattól a Videoton-Waltham Football Clubig (Székesfehérvár, 1991)

Posch Ede - Sipos József (szerk.): A Videoton nagy napjai (Székesfehérvár, 1985)

APPENDIX

1. Appendix: Topics/Questions of the In-Depth Interviews (Hungarian)

1	A kutatási téma bemutatása
2	Nincsenek jó vagy rossz válaszok
3	Érdekel a széles véleménye
4	Anonimitás

5	Disszertáció lesz belőle
6	A beszélgetés rögzítésre kerül, a későbbi könnyebb feldolgozás miatt <i>(beleegyezés igen/nem)</i>
7	Lehet a Club is megismeri a kutatást
8	Bármilyen kérdés mielőtt kezdenénk?
9	Kérem meséljen pár szót magáról
10	Pár demográfiai bemutatkozást is kérnék (kor, nem, végzettség)
11	Merre lakik?
12	Milyen a kapcsolata Székesfehérvárral/Fejér megye felé?
13	Milyen emlékei vannak a fehérvári labdarúgással kapcsolatban a múltból? Meséljen a legkorábbi fehérvári labdarúgással kapcsolatos élményéről
14	Melyik a legkedvesebb pozitív élménye? És a legrosszabb?
15	Mi az első 3 szó, ami eszébe jut az Mol-Fehérvár FC-ről?
16	Meséljen a Klubhoz való kapcsolódásáról/kötődéséről, mit jelent Önnek a klubhoz való tartozás érzése?
17	Mi a legjobb az Mol-Fehérvár FC-ben, mi a legrosszabb benne? Mi az, amit folytatni kellene mi az, amit abba kellene hagyni?
18	Ki volt a Fehérvár történetében a legjobb játékos?
19	Ha az Mol-Fehérvár FC egy ember lenne és belépne az ajtón, hogyan nézne ki? Mit szeretne? Mi lenne a foglalkozása, mi lenne a hobbija? Miért?
20	A fehérvári labdarúgás történetében mikor volt először mérkőzésen?
21	Fel tudja idézni, hogy mikor volt először Mol-Fehérvár FC mérkőzésen?
22	Mondja el azt a 3 dolgot, ami miatt mérkőzésre jár!
23	Milyen érzés belépni az Mol-Fehérvár FC hazai stadionjába a Mol Sóstó Arénába? Mindig így érezte? Ha nem, akkor mikor érezte másként? Mesélje el ezt az élményt is.
24	Mesélje el, hogy miért nem jár a Mol-Fehérvár FC mérkőzéseire? (ha van ilyen)
25	Mennyivel hamarabb megy ki a mérkőzésre, és miért annyival hamarabb?
26	Mesélje el, hogy milyen az a nap, amikor mérkőzésre megy. Mesélje el reggeltől egészen addig, hogy véget ér a nap.
27	Mecsek után általában boldogan vagy dühösen jön el?
28	Mi motiválja abban, hogy állandósággal kijárjon a Mol-Fehérvár FC meccsekre? Mi az, ami most gátolja?
29	Mi lenne az a három dolog, ami korlátozza a teltház megteremtődését?
30	Ön szerint a magyar bajnoki közvetítések milyen hatással vannak a nézőszámra?
31	A csökkentett TV mérkőzés-közvetítés szám hogyan hatna a nézőszámra?
32	Mit gondol, előnyös a sportágra a forduló összes mérkőzésének közvetítése?

33	Milyen előnye és hátránya van a forduló összes mérkőzésének közvetítésének?
34	Ön melyiket választaná? Minden mérkőzés közvetítése, vagy csak kiválasztottakat? Miért?
35	Mit gondol az MLSZ szurkolói politikájáról?
36	Egyetért az MLSZ által követett szurkolói tevékenységgel?
37	Mit gondol az MLSZ segíti / gátolja a nézőszám alakulásának trendjét a magyar bajnoki mérközéseken?
38	Ön szerint - ha egyáltalán kell - az MLSZ-nek miben kellene változtatnia a szurkolói politikáján?

Mutatok két fotót (kongó üres stadion vs sokan vannak)

39	Hogy érzik magukat az emberek az egyik és a másik helyzetben?
40	Miért van tele / miért üres? Mi lehet az ok?
41	Mit gondol, (a klub felé) mi az üzenete az üres lelátónak?

Az emberek jellemzően ezek miatt az okok miatt járnak meccsre. PAPIRRÓL BEMUTATVA (1) dicsekvés, 2) a fehérvári kötődés, 3) az Mol-Fehérvár FC, 4) a közösség, 5) a feszültség kiadása, 6) unaloműzés, 7) ismerkedés, 8) a sportág szeretete, 9) a mérkőzés hangulata, 10) gyűlölködés, 11) emlékek megélése, 12) szakmai fejlődés, 13) az Mol-Fehérvár FC-hez való tartozás kifejezése, 14) a Klub merchandise termékeinek viselése.)

42	Az Ön esetében mi a fontossági sorrend, kérem rakja sorrendbe őket.
43	Miért az... a legfontosabb, miért a ... a legérdektelenebb?
44	Mi az a 3 dolog, amit szeret a Mol-Fehérvár FC-ben (mint csapatban)?
45	Mi az a 3 dolog, amit nem szeret a Mol-Fehérvár FC-ben?
46	Személyiségük, játékuk alapján ki a kedvenc futballistája a jelenlegi csapatban és mit/kit nem kedvelsz?
47	Volt-e olyan alkalom, amikor ment volna a Mol-Fehérvár FC meccsre, de nem ment? Mi volt az oka?
48	Képzeld el, hogy vége van egy Mol-Fehérvár FC mérkőzésnek. Milyen érzések vannak Önben? Mitől függ, hogyan érzi magát a mérkőzés után?
49	Mi az az 1-3 ok, amiért ÁLLANDÓSÁGGAL jár a Mol-Fehérvár FC mérkőzéseire? Ha nem jár ÁLLANDÓSÁGGAL - Mi lenne az az ok, ami miatt ÁLLANDÓSÁGGAL járna mérkőzésre?

Mennyire tetszik az Mol-Fehérvár FC arculata? MUTATOK KÉPEKET. Válassza ki melyik a jelenben a csapat által használt hivatalos. Közben mondja el, miket érez vagy gondol?

50	A név?
51	A színek?
52	A logó?
53	Mennyire érzed magadénak az Mol-Fehérvár FC arculatát? (százalékban) Mi lenne a 100% és a 0%? Azaz mi a skáládon a lépték, a terjedelem?
54	Ön szerint a megye/a város lakossága meg tudná tölteni a stadiont?
55	Hogy jellemezné Székesfehérvár sport iránt érdeklődő lakosságát 3 szóban?
56	Milyennek látja a városi vezetés és a Mol-Fehérvár FC kapcsolatát?
57	Ön szerint a város minden lehetőségét kihasználja a Mol-Fehérvár FC a maga érdekében?
58	Mit tenne másképp, ha az Mol-Fehérvár FC-ben dolgozna?
59	Milyen Mol-Fehérvár FC csapatot szeretné látni?
60	Mit tenne, mondana, hogy meggyőzze a távolmaradókat a mérkőzészátogatásra?
61	Mit javasolna a Klub tulajdonosának?
62	Ha egy valakinek üzenhetne a Klubban, kinek és mit üzenne?
63	Mit gondol a sport és a politika kapcsolatáról? A Mol-Fehérvár esetében van-e ilyen, azt helyesnek gondolja-e?
64	Kimaradt-e a beszélgetésből valami? Szeretné-e kiegészíteni valamivel?
65	Ajánlaná ismerőseinek?
66	Hogy érezte magát, milyen volt a kutatás?

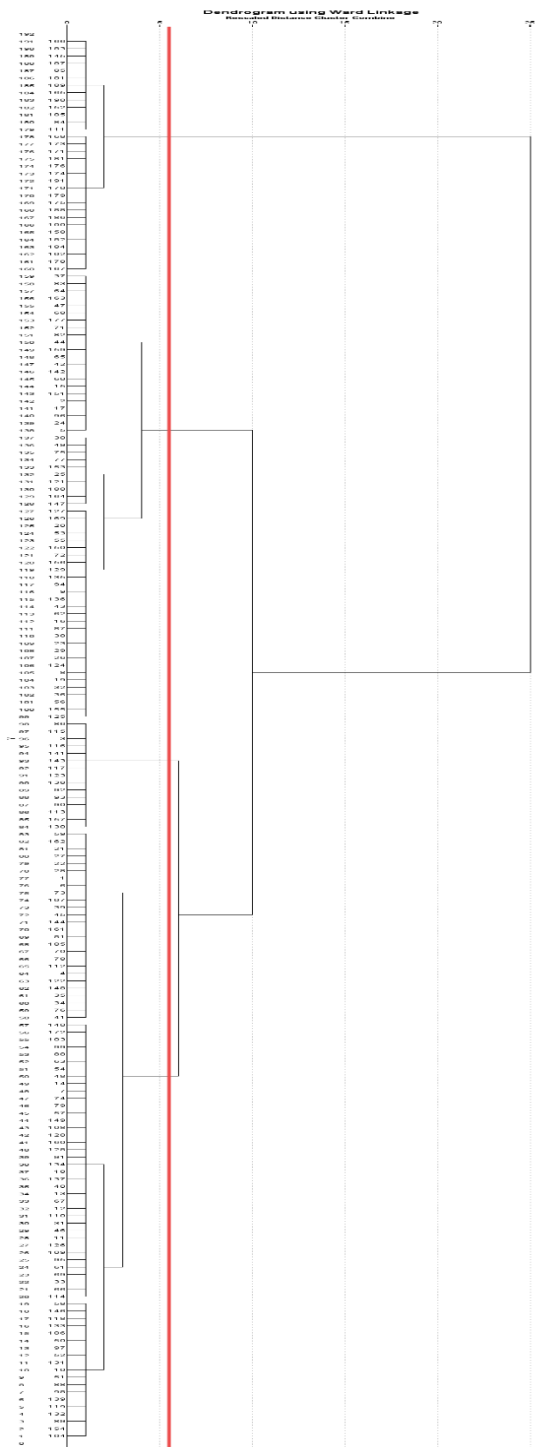
2. Appendix: Correlations Between the Indicators

	Team Satisfaction	Dissatisfaction	Cognitive Identification	Affective Identification	Evaluative Identification	Attitudinal Loyalty	Behavioral Involvement (4-item scale)	Behavioral Involvement (3-item scale)
Team Satisfaction	1	-0,366**	-0,089	-0,045	0,385**	-0,052	-0,051	-0,079
Dissatisfaction	-0,366**	1	-0,299**	-0,265**	-0,121	-0,257**	-0,293**	-0,279**
Cognitive Identification	-0,089	-0,299**	1	0,859**	0,164*	0,880**	0,788**	0,744**
Affective Identification	-0,045	-0,265**	0,859**	1	0,165*	0,809**	0,702**	0,649**
Evaluative Identification	0,385**	-0,121	0,164*	0,165*	1	0,168*	0,161*	0,148*

Attitudinal Loyalty	-0,052	-0,257**	0,880**	0,809**	0,168*	1	0,8	0,765
Behavioral Involvement (4-item scale)	-0,051	-0,293**	0,788**	0,702**	0,161*	0,800**	1	0,975**
Behavioral Involvement (3-item scale)	-0,079	-0,279**	0,744**	0,649**	0,148*	0,765*	0,975**	1

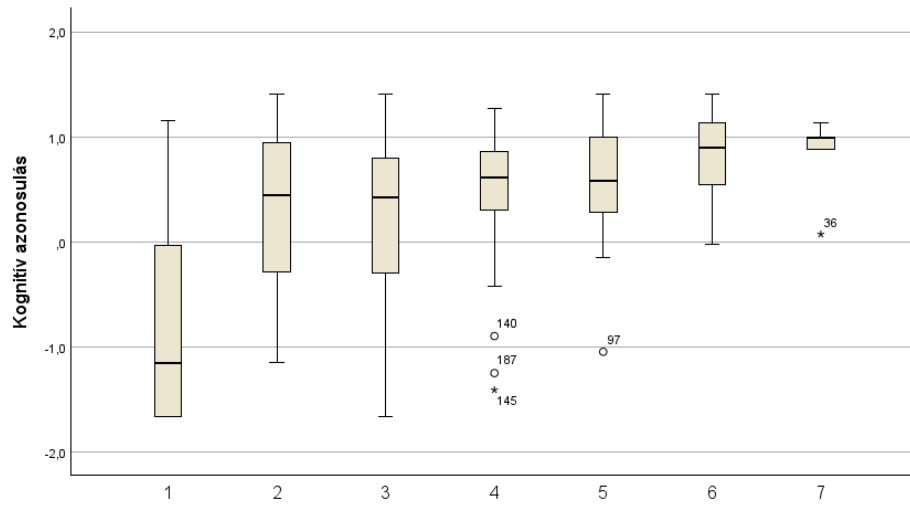
Source: Own calculations

3. Appendix: Four Clusters of the Dendrogram

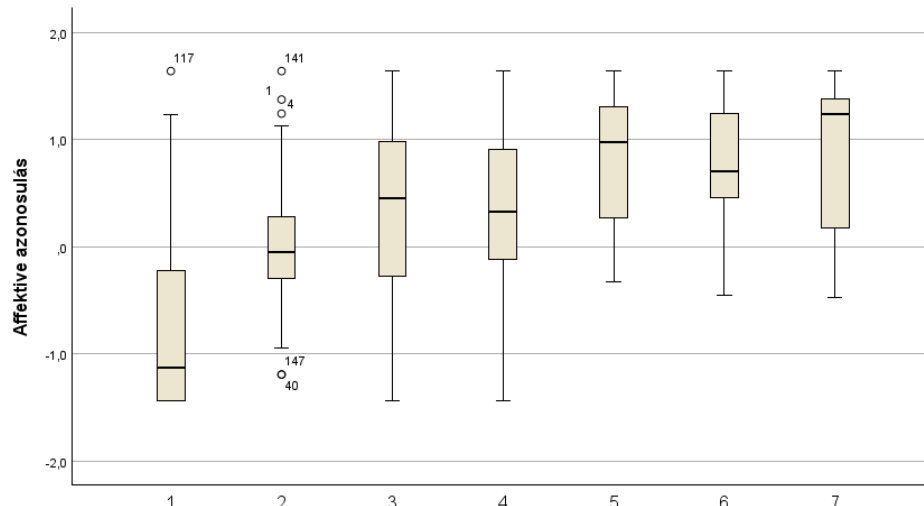


Source: Own calculations

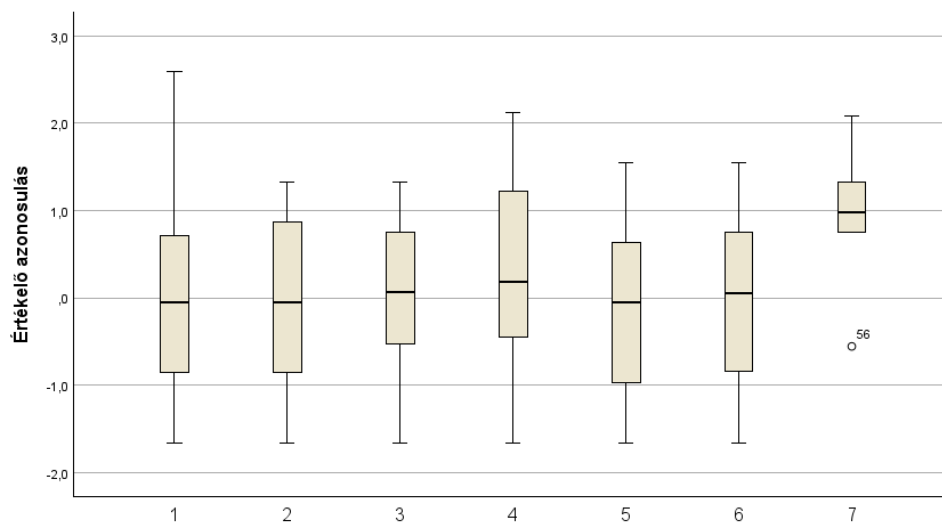
4. Appendix: Boxplots – Cognitive, Affective, and Evaluative Identification



A szezon során milyen gyakorisággal követte a csapatot az alábbi módon... személyesen.

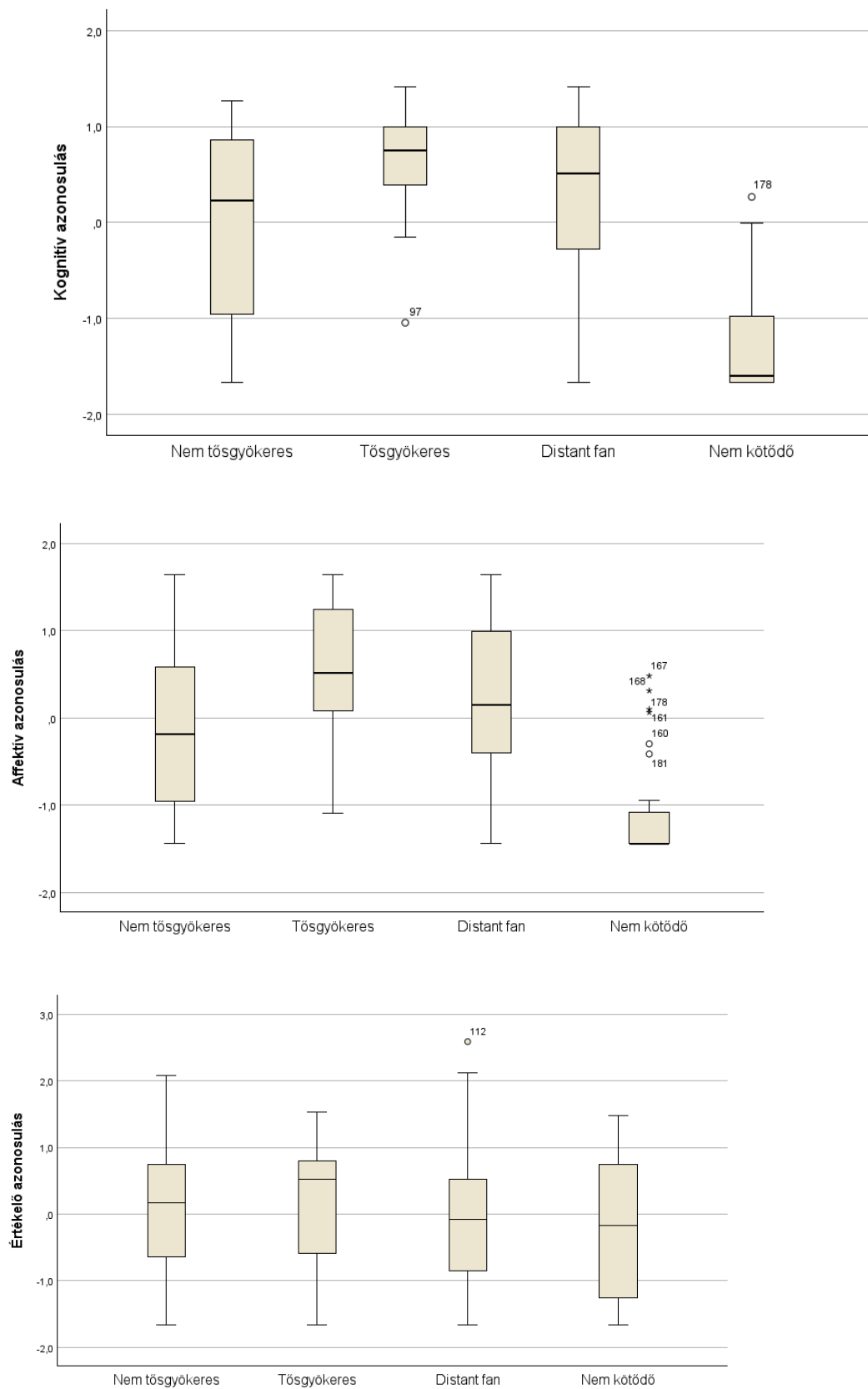


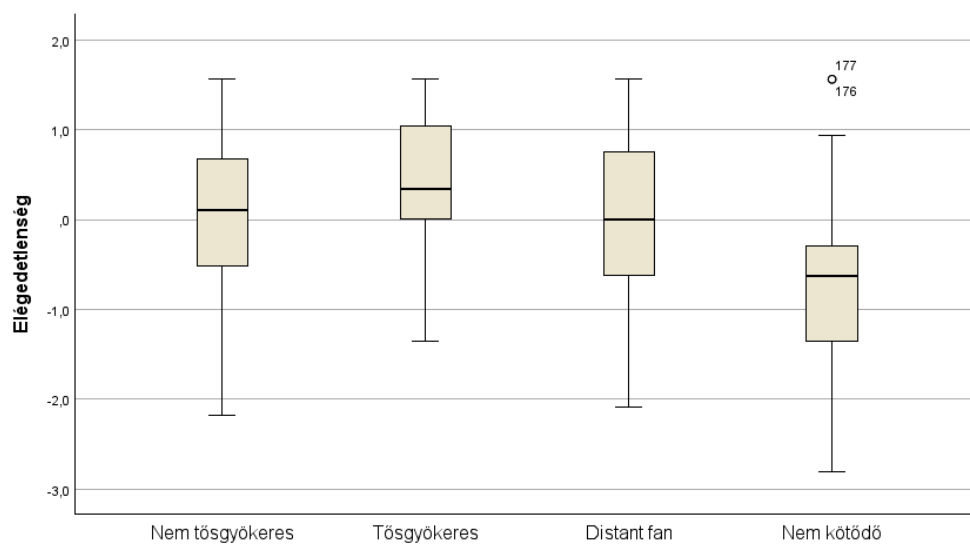
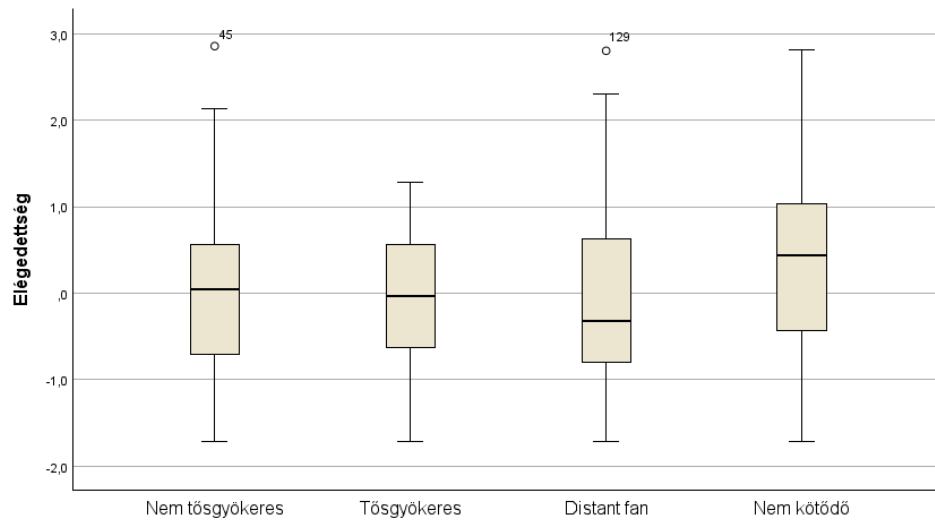
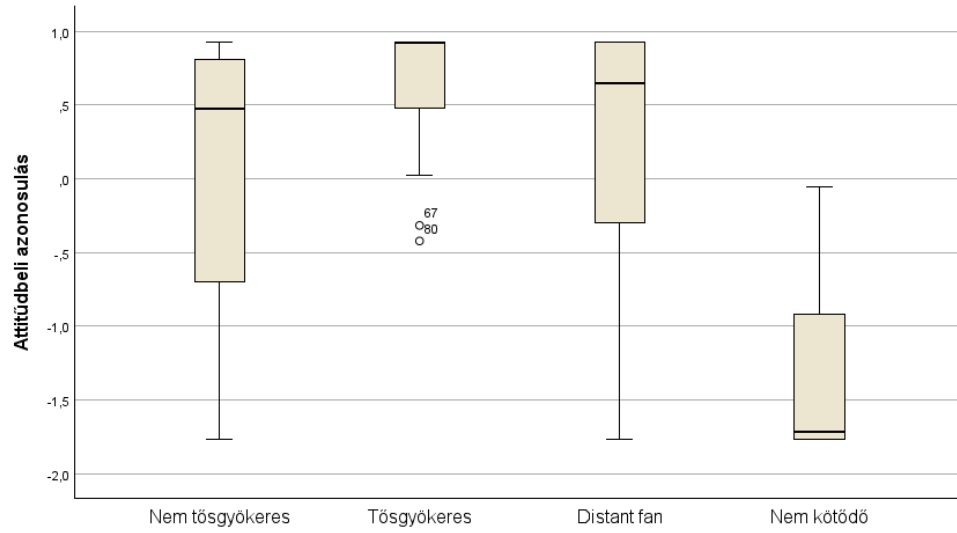
A szezon során milyen gyakorisággal követte a csapatot az alábbi módon... személyesen.

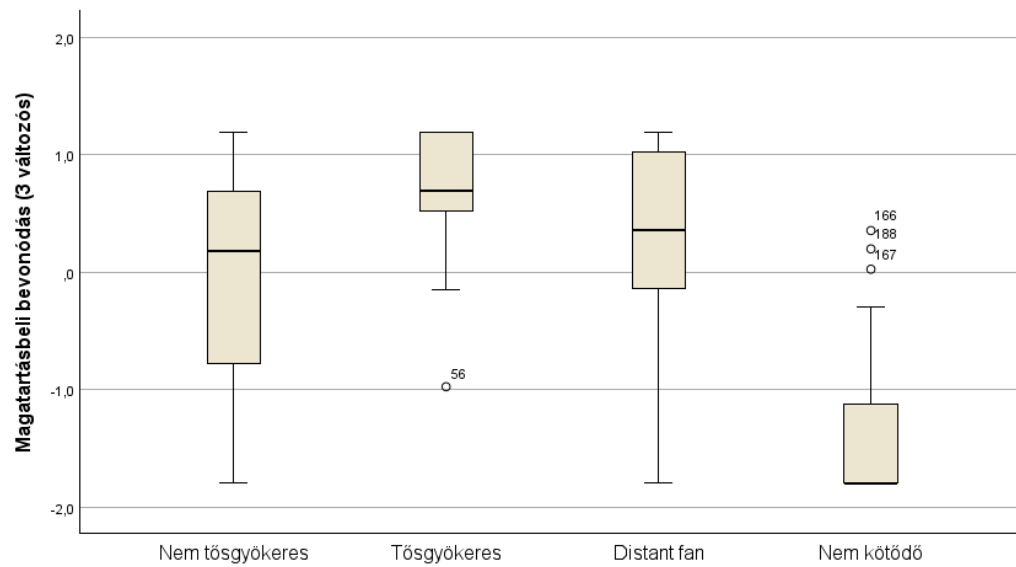
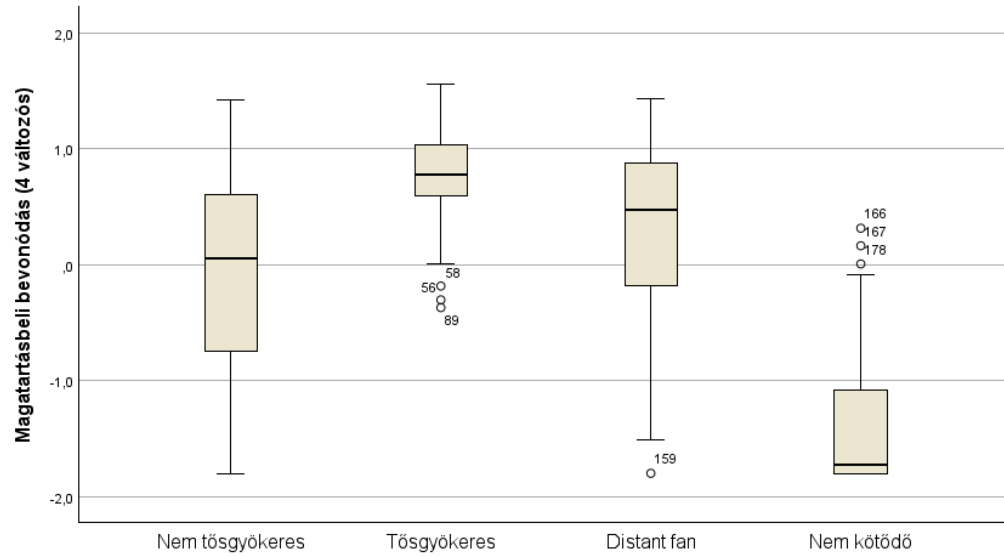


A szezon során milyen gyakorisággal követte a csapatot az alábbi módon... személyesen.

Boxplots – Differences Between Clusters







Source: Own calculations