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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 thesis booklet

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I. Research Background and Rationale

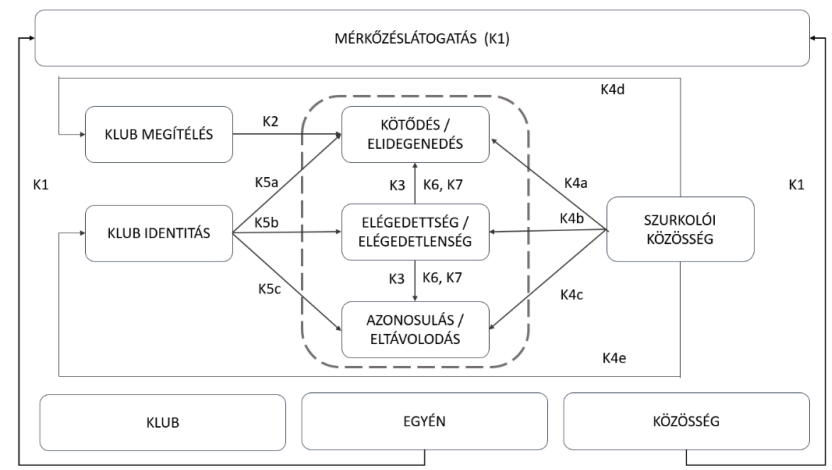
Over the past decades, sports economics and sports marketing have evolved into independent, interdisciplinary fields of research that examine the social, economic, and psychological dimensions of sport. Professional sport has become part of the global entertainment industry, in which the sustainable operation of sports organizations increasingly depends on the engagement, loyalty, and consumption willingness of fan communities.

In international literature, considerable attention has been devoted to sport brand equity, fan loyalty, identification, and attachment. A dominant theoretical framework is the Psychological Continuum Model (Funk & James, 2001), which describes the developmental stages of sport consumer commitment, as well as models examining the attitudinal and behavioral dimensions of loyalty and the service quality–satisfaction–behavioral intention framework. These approaches primarily focus on positive relational processes, strengthening commitment, and developing brand loyalty (Bee & Havitz, 2010; Gladden & Funk, 2001; Yoshida et al., 2015).

At the same time, a review of the literature reveals that the weakening of fan attachment and alienation in a sport consumption context remains a relatively underrepresented research area. The concept of alienation appears primarily within sociological and general consumer behavior frameworks, whereas it is less elaborate in sport marketing. Existing models typically do not address attachment and alienation in an integrated manner, nor do they model the stages of weakening fan relationships.

A further research gap is that the relationship between clubs and fans is often interpreted exclusively through economic or performance-based factors. At the same time, limited attention is paid to relational dimensions grounded in shared identity, implicit norms, and mutual expectations. The club–fan relationship may be interpreted as a tacit “invisible contract” built upon shared values, credibility, and trust. The violation of this contract may serve as a potential starting point of alienation; however, its empirical examination remains limited within the sport marketing literature.

The structural challenges in Hungarian football further reinforce the research's relevance and timeliness. Over the past decade, significant infrastructural developments have been implemented; however, stadium utilization rates and match attendance have remained persistently low. This phenomenon is also relevant from a sport's economics perspective, as fan presence not only generates ticket revenue but also contributes to the sport's brand equity, community legitimacy, and long-term sustainability.



Source: own compilation

The empirical context of the dissertation is provided by a case study of MOL Fehérvár FC, which offered the opportunity to examine the weakening of fan attachment and the process of alienation within a specific sports economic setting. The case-based approach allows for a deeper, context-sensitive understanding of the development of fans' emotions, perceptions, and attitudes.

The primary objective of the dissertation is to integrate the examination of fan attachment, satisfaction, loyalty, and alienation, and to develop a model describing the process of attachment deterioration. The research seeks to connect classical models of sport consumer commitment with the concept of alienation and to create a conceptual framework that systematizes the examined variables and presents their interrelationships in a visually interpretable manner. The study's scientific contribution can be identified at several levels. First, it introduces the concept of alienation into the sport marketing context and empirically examines its emotional and behavioral dimensions. Second, it identifies and systematizes the stages of weakening fan attachment, thereby complementing models that primarily focus on attachment formation and strengthening. Third, it applies the concept of the “invisible contract” to interpret the club–fan relationship and highlights its strategic relevance. Finally, by conducting an empirical investigation within the domestic sport market context, the study contributes to international literature by testing and extending existing theoretical frameworks within a specific institutional and cultural environment. Thus, the dissertation contributes not only to the theoretical understanding of sport consumer behavior but is also practically relevant, as it demonstrates that the quality of fan relationships is a strategically significant factor in the long-term economic and social sustainability of sport clubs.

II. Methods

The dissertation's methodological framework is based on a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods research approach. The study aimed to conduct a complex, multidimensional examination of fan attachment, loyalty, satisfaction, and alienation, which justified the sequential application of qualitative and quantitative methods. The research followed an exploratory design: the first phase relied on qualitative data collection serving model-building and hypothesis-generating purposes, while the second phase employed quantitative data collection to validate and extend the qualitative findings empirically.

The empirical investigation was conducted in a case study context, provided by the operation of MOL Fehérvár FC, a club competing in the Hungarian first division football league. The case-based approach enabled a context-sensitive and in-depth analysis of fan attachment and alienation.

Qualitative data collection was carried out through semi-structured in-depth interviews. Purposeful sampling was applied to ensure the inclusion of both active and formerly active fans. The interviews focused on fan identification, emotional attachment, loyalty, perceptions of the club, and processes of distancing and alienation. The interviews were analyzed using thematic content analysis, applying both inductive and deductive coding procedures. The objective of the study was to identify recurring patterns, narrative structures, and emotional mechanisms, which provided the foundation for the stage model of attachment deterioration and for the development of constructs used in the quantitative phase.

Quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire. During the development of the questionnaire, internationally validated measurement scales were adapted and complemented with context-specific factors identified in the qualitative phase. The measured constructs included fan identification, attitudinal and behavioral loyalty, satisfaction, club perception, match attendance frequency, and emotional distancing.

Data analysis involved descriptive statistical procedures, principal component analysis/factor analysis, cluster analysis, analysis of variance (ANOVA), and correlation analysis. The statistical analysis aimed to confirm the qualitative findings, identify fan segments, and explore the relationships among the examined constructs. Cluster analysis enabled the differentiation of distinct fan groups that respond differently to the club's operations and communication.

The research's theoretical framework was grounded in key models of sport consumer behavior, with particular emphasis on the Psychological Continuum Model, approaches examining the attitudinal and behavioral dimensions of loyalty, and the service quality–satisfaction–behavioral intention framework. Based on the integration of qualitative and quantitative findings, a model of fan attachment deterioration was developed, interpreting alienation as an independent, stage-based process.

Special attention was devoted to ensuring methodological validity and reliability. The application of triangulation, the use of validated measurement scales, and the systematic procedures of data analysis contributed to the scientific rigor of the findings. Data was handled in an anonymized manner, in accordance with ethical standards.

III. Scientific Results of the Dissertation

The empirical and theoretical findings of the dissertation contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of sport consumer behavior by examining fan attachment, loyalty, and alienation within an integrated framework. One of the most important findings of the research is that the weakening of fan attachment cannot be interpreted as a linear, gradual decrease in intensity; rather, it should be understood as a process unfolding along clearly identifiable, emotionally grounded stages.

Based on the qualitative findings, alienation is not merely a low level of loyalty but can be conceptualized as an independent construct with distinct emotional, cognitive, and behavioral characteristics. The research empirically demonstrates that decreasing loyalty and alienation are not identical phenomena: in the latter case, active emotional distancing and identity reconfiguration can be observed.

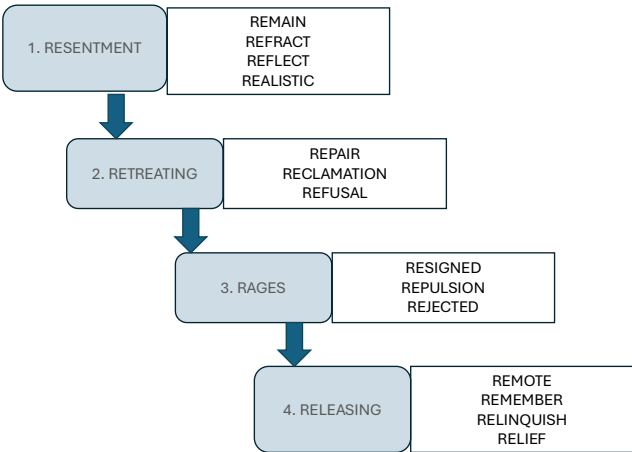
One of the dissertation's central scientific contributions is the development of a four-stage model of fan alienation. The model describes the process of attachment deterioration through the phases of resentment, withdrawal, anger, and letting go. In the resentment stage, the accumulation of negative experiences and disappointments becomes evident; during withdrawal, participation and emotional intensity decline; in the anger phase, active emotional rejection emerges, while letting go signifies the dissolution of identity ties with the club. This model extends the Psychological Continuum Model toward lower commitment and enriches the interpretation of sport consumer relationships by introducing a new dimension.

Another significant result of the research is the empirical substantiation that the relationship between clubs and fans can be interpreted as an implicit “invisible contract.” Fans develop a tacit system of expectations toward the club, built on credibility, shared community values, professional operation, and transparency. The violation of these normative expectations—such as a decline in communication quality, the marginalization of core values, or the weakening of community identity—may serve as a key starting point of the alienation process.

The quantitative analysis confirmed the results of the qualitative phase. The findings show that the complex construct of club perception is significantly associated with emotional identification, satisfaction, and frequency of match attendance. Club perception plays a mediating role between satisfaction and behavioral intention, underscoring that factors beyond on-field performance also shape fan behavior.

The table titled “Stages of Fan Disattachment” reflects the dissertation’s original theoretical contribution, which can be interpreted as an extension of international models that primarily focus on the strengthening of attachment. While the Psychological Continuum Model and related loyalty theories describe the developmental direction of increasing commitment, the present research aimed to explore and systematize the emotional mechanisms underlying the weakening of attachment. The model's development was grounded in the analysis of recurring narrative patterns and emotional structures identified during the qualitative data collection, which were integrated with disidentification and consumer distancing approaches from the literature.

Stages of Fan Disattachment



Source: own compilation

The stages presented in the table - Resentment, Retreating, Rages, and Releasing - are not merely descriptive categories but empirically identified, sequential emotional states that indicate the gradual transformation of fan identity. A distinctive feature of the model is that it interprets negative emotions not as anomalies, but as natural components of brand relationship dynamics, thereby contributing to a bidirectional understanding (strengthening and weakening) of sport consumer relationships. Methodologically, the stage model is grounded in the findings of qualitative content analysis, while at the theoretical level, it extends the conceptual frameworks of sport marketing and brand relationship literature.

The model's practical relevance lies in the structured framework it offers for shaping sports clubs' marketing thinking. Identifying the stages of disattachment enables the differentiated management of the fan base and the development of targeted communication strategies tailored to specific emotional states. For example, during the resentment stage, transparent communication and trust-building may be crucial, whereas in the withdrawal phase, experience- and community-based activation may be an effective intervention. Thus, the model provides not only theoretical systematization but also supports strategic decision-making aimed at increasing attendance by identifying fan segments.

From an economic perspective, applying the model may facilitate early detection and management of declining match attendance intentions. Targeted, stage-specific interventions create opportunities for clubs to address attendance problems not merely reactively, but through proactive, data-driven marketing strategies. This approach elevates fan relationship management to a key factor of sport economic sustainability and may indirectly contribute to stabilizing revenue structures. The model represents a significant contribution not only because of its practical applicability but also because it addresses a clear gap in the sport marketing literature. Previous research has predominantly focused on strengthening fan commitment, developing loyalty, and growing brand equity, while a structured, stage-based model of attachment deterioration has been lacking in the sport consumption context. Although the concept of alienation has appeared sporadically in sociological and general consumer research, its operationalization and empirical grounding in sport marketing have not been systematically developed. The "Stages of Fan Disattachment" model addresses this gap by systematizing and empirically substantiating the emotional processes underlying attachment deterioration and integrating them into existing theoretical frameworks of sport consumer commitment. In doing so, it extends earlier, predominantly unidirectional (commitment-focused) approaches toward a dynamic, bidirectional relational model that interprets both relationship-strengthening and relationship-weakening mechanisms.

The practical implication of this scientific contribution is that clubs can adopt a structured, data-driven approach to fan relationship management. Identifying stages of disattachment provides a basis not only for targeted communication and segmentation but also for managing declines in match attendance from an economic perspective. The model thus represents not only theoretical innovation but also a potential strategic framework for addressing attendance-related challenges in the long term.

The findings also demonstrate that the stadium experience functions not merely as service infrastructure, but as an identity-forming and community-shaping space. Stadium atmosphere, shared community experiences, and collective emotional moments have a significant impact on maintaining attachment, while their weakening may contribute to alienation.

Cluster analysis identified distinct fan segments that respond differently to the club's operations, communication, and performance. This result suggests that treating fans as a homogeneous group may distort marketing and management decisions, underscoring the necessity of a differentiated approach.

The overarching scientific contribution of the dissertation lies in its integration of attachment, loyalty, satisfaction, and alienation constructs within a unified theoretical framework. The developed integrated model interprets sport consumer relationships dynamically and allows for the simultaneous examination of positive (commitment-strengthening) and negative (alienation) processes. This approach goes beyond earlier fragmented models and offers a new perspective on sport marketing theory.

The findings are also practically relevant, as they highlight that the quality of fan relationships is a strategically significant factor in the long-term economic sustainability of sports clubs. Addressing fan alienation is not merely a matter of communication or promotion; it requires a value-driven, trust-building approach that permeates the club's entire operation.

IV. Key References

The theoretical and methodological foundations of the dissertation are supported by an extensive body of domestic and international literature, with particular emphasis on sport marketing, sport consumer behavior, fan attachment, and loyalty research. The study builds on the dominant models of sport consumer commitment, theories of brand equity and loyalty, and the service quality–satisfaction–behavioral intention framework.

The theoretical background of the qualitative and mixed-method approach is grounded in seminal works of international methodological literature. In addition, the dissertation is closely connected to the author's previous scientific publications related to the topic, which contributed to the development of the theoretical framework and the empirical model.

Aaker, D. A. (1992). The value of brand equity. *Journal of Business Strategy*, 13(4), 27–32.

Aaker, D. A. (1996). *Building strong brands*. Free Press.

Andreff, W., & Szymanski, S. (2006). *Handbook on the economics of sport*. Edward Elgar.

Bauer, H. H., Sauer, N. E., & Schmitt, P. (2008). Customer-based brand equity in the team sport industry. *European Journal of Marketing*, 42(3/4), 496–513.

Bee, C. C., & Havitz, M. E. (2010). Exploring the relationship between involvement, fan attraction, psychological commitment, and behavioral loyalty in a sports spectator context. *International Journal of Sports Marketing & Sponsorship*, 11(2), 37–54.

Biscaia, R., Correia, A., Ross, S., Rosado, A., & Maroco, J. (2013). Spectator-based brand equity in professional soccer. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 22(1), 20–32.

Biscaia, R., Ross, S., Yoshida, M., Correia, A., Rosado, A., & Maroco, J. (2016). Investigating the role of fan identification on the relationship between service quality and satisfaction in professional soccer. *Journal of Sport Management*, 30(4), 410–425.

Brand, A., Anagnostopoulos, C., & Chadwick, S. (2023). Rethinking sport brand management. *Journal of Sport Management*, 37(1), 1–15.

Clemes, M. D., Brush, G. J., & Collins, M. J. (2011). Analysing the professional sport experience: A hierarchical approach. *Sport Management Review*, 14(4), 370–388.

Couvelaere, V., & Richelieu, A. (2005). Brand strategy in professional sports: The case of French soccer teams. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 5(1), 23–46.

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Sage.

Funk, D. C., & James, J. (2001). The psychological continuum model: A conceptual framework for understanding an individual's psychological connection to sport. *Sport Management Review*, 4(2), 119–150.

Gladden, J. M., & Funk, D. C. (2001). Understanding brand loyalty in professional sport. *International Journal of Sports Marketing & Sponsorship*, 3(1), 54–81.

Gladden, J. M., & Funk, D. C. (2002). Developing an understanding of brand associations in team sport. *International Journal of Sports Marketing & Sponsorship*, 4(1), 54–81.

Gratton, C., & Taylor, P. (2000). *Economics of sport and recreation*. E & FN Spon.

Keller, K. L. (1993). Conceptualizing, measuring, and managing customer-based brand equity. *Journal of Marketing*, 57(1), 1–22.

Keller, K. L. (2020). *Strategic brand management* (5th ed.). Pearson.

Kunkel, T. (2013). Brand equity in professional team sport. *Journal of Sport Management*, 27(6), 502–517.

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis*. Sage.

Mullin, B. J., Hardy, S., & Sutton, W. A. (2000). *Sport marketing* (2nd ed.). Human Kinetics.

Ross, S. D., Russell, K. C., & Bang, H. (2008). An empirical assessment of spectator-based brand equity. *Journal of Sport Management*, 22(3), 322–337.

Stavros, C., Lock, D., & Karg, A. (2014). Fan engagement in sport. *Sport Management Review*, 17(4), 455–469.

Tashakkori, A., & Teddlie, C. (2010). *Mixed methodology: Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Sage.

Yoshida, M., Gordon, B., Nakazawa, M., & Biscaia, R. (2015). Conceptualization and measurement of fan engagement. *Journal of Sport Management*, 29(4), 399–417.

The findings of these publications were directly incorporated into the dissertation's analytical framework and played a decisive role in developing the model of fan attachment deterioration and formulating practical recommendations. Building on these seminal works, the dissertation developed an integrated theoretical framework that enabled a complex, multidimensional interpretation of fan attachment, loyalty, and alienation.

V. List of the Author's (and Co-authored) Publications Related to the Topic

The following publications are directly related to the dissertation topic and served as partial studies and as preliminary research underlying the present study. These works contributed to the gradual refinement of the research questions, the conceptual clarification of key constructs, and the development of the empirical design.

Furthermore, they provided initial empirical evidence and theoretical insights that were systematically integrated into the final model presented in the dissertation. Collectively, these publications demonstrate the coherent and cumulative nature of the research process underpinning the dissertation.

Bodon, G. (2024). Negatív érzelmek marketing értéke: Kvalitatív kutatás részeredményei egy magyar labdarúgó csapatnál. In K. Szűcs, P. Putzer & M. Törőcsik (Szerk.), *A (marketing) világ megkettőződése. Az Egyesület a Marketing Oktatásért és Kutatásért XXX. Nemzetközi Konferenciájának absztrakt- és tanulmánykötete* (p. 17). Pécsi Tudományegyetem Közgazdaságtudományi Kar.

Bodon, G. (2025). Action and reaction: How political influence perceptions interact with football fan loyalty. *Managing Sport and Leisure*, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23750472.2025.2495155>

Bodon, G. (2025). Extending the Psychological Continuum Model: A case study on the stages of fan disattachment from a football team. *Journal of Global Sport Management*, 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24704067.2025.2582203>

Bodon, G., & Neulinger, Á. (2024). A szurkolók sportklubhoz való kötődésének jelentősége a mérkőzéslátogatásra a hazai labdarúgás esetében. *Marketing & Menedzsment*, 58(1), 55–64. <https://doi.org/10.15170/MM.2024.58.01.06>

Bodon, G., Kajos, A., & Neulinger, Á. (2023). Kell még szurkoló a stadionokba? A csapattal való szurkolói azonosulás és a csapathoz való kötődés vizsgálata egy hazai futballklub esetében. *Vezetéstudomány – Budapest Management Review*, 54(7–8), 13–27. <https://doi.org/10.14267/VEZTUD.2023.07-08.02>

Bodon, G., Neulinger, Á., & Kajos, A. (2023). A mérkőzéslátogatás és a klubhoz való kötődés közötti kapcsolat kvalitatív elemzése: Egy futballklub példája. In B. Révész & Zs. Gyulai (Szerk.), *Reziliens marketing – válaszok változó kihívásokra: Egyesület a Marketing Oktatásért és Kutatásért XXIX. Nemzetközi konferencia absztraktkötet* (pp. 27–27). Szegedi Tudományegyetem Gazdaságtudományi Kar.