

How Football Celebritys' Brand Authenticity Shapes Fan Loyalty: The Mediating Role of Team Brand Image

Futbol Ünlülerinin Marka Özgünlüğü Taraftar Sadakatini Nasıl Şekillendiriyor?
Takım Marka İmajının Aracı Rolü

Research Article / Araştırma Makalesi

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to determine the effect of personel brand identification and celebrity authenticity of famous athletes on fan loyalty. In order to test the hypotheses of the model, the fans of the four major football teams (Galatasaray, Fenerbahçe, Beşiktaş, Trabzonspor) in the Turkish Super League were selected as the research group. Data collected from 408 respondents using online survey tools was analyzed using structural equation modeling with Smart PLS software. According to the findings, talent and originality among rarity constructs affect celebrity authenticity. In addition, football players' personal brand identification and celebrity authenticity positively affect team image, while team image positively affects fans' behavioural and attitudinal loyalty. It will be important for football team managers and sports marketing departments to bring famous players to their teams to improve club image and fan loyalty. In addition, the harmony between the famous footballer and the team image plays an important role in this relationship. This study presents a multidimensional conceptual framework based on Brand Authenticity Theory. The model offers a different perspective by identifying rarity constructs (talent, discretion and originality) as antecedents of celebrity authenticity and examining their impact on both personnel brand identification and team brand image.

Keywords: Celebrity, Authenticity, Football Star, Team Image, Loyalty

Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı, ünlü sporcuların kişisel marka özdeşleşmesi ve ünlü özgünlüğünün taraftar sadakati üzerindeki etkisini belirlemektir. Modelin hipotezlerini test etmek için Türkiye Süper Ligi'nde yer alan dört büyük futbol takımının (Galatasaray, Fenerbahçe, Beşiktaş, Trabzonspor) taraftarları araştırma grubu olarak seçilmiştir. Çevrimiçi anket araçları ile 408 taraftardan toplanan veriler Smart PLS yazılımı aracılığıyla yapısal eşitlik modellemesi ile analiz edilmiştir. Bulgulara göre, nadirlik yapılarından yetenek ve orijinallik ünlülerin özgünlüğünü etkilemektedir. Ayrıca, futbolcuların kişisel marka kimliği ve ünlü özgünlüğü takım imajını olumlu yönde etkilerken, takım imajı da taraftarların davranışsal ve tutumsal sadakatini olumlu yönde etkilemektedir. Futbol takımı yöneticileri ve spor pazarlama departmanları, kulüp imajını ve taraftar sadakatini geliştirmek için ünlü oyuncularını takımlarına kazandırmaları önem arz edecektir. Ayrıca ünlü futbolcu ile takım imajı arasındaki uyum da bu ilişkide önemli bir rol oynamaktadır. Bu çalışma, Marka Özgünlüğü Teorisi'ne dayanan çok boyutlu bir kavramsal çerçeve sunmaktadır. Model, nadirlik yapılarını (yetenek, takdir ve orijinallik) ünlü özgünlüğünün öncülleri olarak tanımlayarak ve bunların hem personel marka özdeşleşmesi hem de takım marka imajı üzerindeki etkilerini inceleyerek farklı bir bakış açısı sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ünlü, Özgünlük, Futbol Yıldızı, Takım İmajı, Sadakat

Introduction

The extreme popularity and commercialisation of professional football has led football clubs to look for ways to attract fans to their teams and to maintain this relationship. For this reason, team managers tend to strengthen their teams with famous players. The influence of individual athletes goes beyond on-field performance, shaping not only match results but also fan perceptions and brand loyalty (Carlson & Donavan, 2013). Globally popular celebrity footballers serve to strengthen the corporate identity of the teams they represent along with their own image (Lobpries, Bennett, & Brison, 2018). For this reason, the personal brand authenticity of the football players in the team has become decisive in connecting fans emotionally and behaviourally to both the player and the team (Bauer, Stokburger-Sauer, & Exler, 2008; Kucharska, Confente, & Brunetti, 2020).

Research has shown that trust, commitment, and loyalty are positively affected by brand authenticity in various fields (Deng, Wang, & Li, 2024; Uysal & Okumuş, 2022; Xu, Prayag, & Song, 2022). Despite existing studies examining the impact of brand identity or brand authenticity on brand loyalty for products or services, footballers' personal brand identification and celebrity authenticity have been studied to a limited extent and continue to attract interest as an important area of research (Moulard, Garrity, & Rice, 2015). Furthermore, the team brand image functions as a pivotal mediating factor in this relationship. A positive team image, influenced by the alignment between the athlete's authentic personality and the club's core values, has the potential to increase fan loyalty and strengthen long-term emotional bonds (Bauer et al., 2008; Gladden & Funk, 2001). However, there is a paucity of research that has empirically examined how the authenticity of celebrity players enhances team brand perceptions, which in turn promotes fan loyalty. Despite the growing academic interest in celebrity branding and fan behaviour, there is a paucity of empirical research addressing how the perceived authenticity of football celebrities contributes to different dimensions of fan loyalty, particularly through the mediating mechanism of team brand image. It is evident that extant studies frequently consider the athlete brand in isolation, without integrating it into a broader theoretical framework. Such frameworks should encompass both individual brand attributes (e.g. authenticity, rarity) and organisational-level constructs (e.g. team image, brand fit) (Lobpries et al., 2018; Moulard et al., 2015).

This study addresses these theoretical and empirical gaps by developing a multidimensional conceptual model grounded in Brand Authenticity Theory. It examines how three components of celebrity rarity—talent, discretion, and originality—influence perceived authenticity, and how this, along with personal brand identification, shapes team brand image. Ultimately, the study investigates how these constructs influence attitudinal and behavioral fan loyalty, decomposing loyalty into

its emotional and action-oriented components for a more nuanced understanding.

By exploring these relationships, the present research responds to recent calls in the literature for integrated models that explain how personal branding strategies and perceived athlete authenticity can generate tangible outcomes at the organizational level, including improved fan engagement and brand equity (Carlson & Donavan, 2013; Morhart, Malär, Guèvremont, Girardin, & Grohmann, 2015).

Furthermore, the research contributes to the practical domain by providing insights for club managers, sports marketers, and talent agents on how aligning a player's authentic image with the team's brand identity can reinforce fan loyalty and long-term commitment. Particularly in the era of social media and global sports consumption, understanding how individual athlete traits influence organizational perception is essential for sustainable brand management. To this end, the study seeks to answer the following research questions (RQ):

RQ1=To what extent do the rarity constructs of talent, discretion, and originality affect the perceived authenticity of football celebrities?

RQ2=How does personal brand identification and celebrity authenticity influence team brand image?

RQ3=How does team brand image affect attitudinal and behavioral fan loyalty?

RQ4=Does team brand image mediate the relationship between (a) personal brand identification and fan loyalty, and (b) celebrity authenticity and fan loyalty?

In summary, this study suggests that athlete authenticity ultimately influences fans' attitudinal and behavioral loyalty. When placed within a broader branding context where the athlete's personal identity, team image, and fan loyalty develop together, it gains strategic value. By filling this literature gap, the research offers both theoretical advancement and practical guidance for stakeholders in the football industry.

Theoretical background

Brand Authenticity Theory

Marketing and consumer research recognises that preferences for authentic consumption stem from traditional sources of self-identity in relation to postmodernity (Morhart et al., 2015). Authentic consumption applies to many consumption items (tourism, restaurants, sports, etc.) that have the potential to create meaning (Chen, Zhou, Zhan, & Zhou, 2020; Kucharska et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2022). Brand authenticity focuses on the perception of a brand as genuine, honest, trustworthy, consistent and loyal (Portal, Abratt, & Bendixen, 2019). It is expected to be explained by dimensions such as credibility, authenticity, and continuity in the sub-dimensions of the theory (Morhart et al.,

2015). Especially today, the fact that consumers are exposed to exaggerated marketing strategies has made it important for consumers to find brands authentic and sincere (Uthaisar, Eves, & Wang, 2024). According to this theory, the success of a brand depends on consumers believing it to be real and authentic (Napoli, Dickinson, Beverland, & Farrelly, 2014). In previous research, this theory has been used in many different sectors (Jian, Zhou, & Zhou, 2019; Safeer, He, Lin, Abrar, & Nawaz, 2023; Schallehn, Burmann, & Riley, 2014). Brand authenticity theory has also been utilised in many studies on celebrities (Ilicic & Webster, 2016; Kucharska et al., 2020; Moulard et al., 2015). For this reason, the model was developed on the basis of brand authenticity in this research, which deals with celebrity football players.

Literature review and hypotheses development

Rarity and Celebrity Authenticity

Moulard et al. (2015) defined rarity as the degree of rarity of the celebrity and put forward the idea that there are unique features that distinguish these celebrities from other celebrities. Again, researchers have put forward three sub-dimensions of rarity: talent, discretion and originality. Talent refers to a person's talent and skill that makes them famous. Discretion, on the other hand, refers to the fact that celebrities are not very visible outside their work and are cautious about revealing their private lives. For this reason, they appear in public more rarely than other celebrities. Originality is the perception that a celebrity acts creatively, authentically and out of the ordinary. Pine and Gilmore (2011) argue that being everywhere and excessive commercialization reduce brand authenticity. These celebrities exhibit unique behaviours instead of following the crowd and following the fashion (Moulard et al., 2015). Previous research has shown that celebrities with unique skills are perceived as more authentic, which creates a sense of admiration in consumers (Cruikshank, 2018). In addition, a celebrity's common sense behaviour, i.e. collaborating with brands in line with their values, increases their authenticity (Kennedy, Baxter, & Kulczynski, 2021). The ability to offer unique perspectives or creative endorsements contributes to a celebrity's overall authenticity and positively affects consumer engagement (Osorio, Centeno, Cambra-Fierro, & del Castillo, 2022). Research has shown that talent, discretion and authenticity positively influence celebrity authenticity (Ilicic & Webster, 2016; Moulard et al., 2015). Based on this information, the following hypotheses were developed:

H1a, H1b, H1c: *Talent, discretion, and originality positively influence celebrity authenticity.*

Personal Brand identification, Celebrity Authenticity and Team Brand Image

Identification is a social influence process in which an individual adopts certain values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours re-

flected by another individual or group (Kelman, 1961). According to social identity theory, individuals who strongly identify with a brand follow the brand, participate in brand-related engagement activities and become brand advocates because the brand has become part of their self-concept (Giakoumaki & Krepapa, 2020; Tajfel, Turner, Austin, & Worchel, 1979). McCracken's (1989) transfer theory helped to reveal the motives behind identification and accordingly, the meaning of the personality perceived in a football player is transferred to the fans through identification with this football player. Fans seeking authenticity may identify with an authentic footballer (Kucharska et al., 2020). In addition, it has also been revealed that identification affects brand image (Coelho, Rita, & Santos, 2018; P. Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013). It is thought that identification with sports celebrities strengthens the image they perceive towards the teams they are fans of. Therefore, the following hypothesis was developed:

H2: *Personal brand identification positively influences brand image.*

The concept of brand authenticity is associated with permanence, authenticity, naturalness and trustworthiness (Bruhn, Schoenmüller, Schäfer, & Heinrich, 2012; Schallehn et al., 2014). Personal brand authenticity is defined as the perception of an individual as authentic, reliable and honest by others (Moulard, Garrity & Rice, 2015). Moulard, Rice, Garrity, and Mangus (2014) suggested that the perception of brand authenticity towards celebrities has a determining effect on the positive attitude of the world around them towards them. In the context of sport, the perception of football players' personal brands as authentic may increase fans' trust and loyalty towards that athlete (Carlson & Donovan, 2013). The bond of the fan who identifies with the sports celebrity is strengthened and in this case, identification plays a key role in a football brand (Richelieu, 2012). Football clubs also want to have the best players within the club's budget. Fans of the team also tend to identify with sports celebrities as personal brands with distinctive personalities (Carlson & Donovan, 2013). The image of an authentic footballer can positively affect brand image by increasing the perceived value and credibility of the brand he represents (Heere & James, 2007). Football fans tend to develop loyalty not only to their team but also to individual players (Arai, Ko, & Ross, 2014). In this context, personal brand authenticity is thought to contribute to the overall image of sports brands and the following hypothesis was developed:

H3: *Celebrity authenticity positively influences brand image.*

Team Brand Image and Fan Loyalty

Brand image is defined as 'brand perceptions that reflect the associations in consumers' minds' (Keller, 1993). Team brand image is a collection of brand associations in the mind of the sports consumer, such as attributes related to the team's products or attributes not related to the team's products (Yun, Rosenberger III, & Sweeney, 2021). Brand image is an important

component to ensure brand loyalty in a competitive environment (Kim, Choe, & Petrick, 2018; Parris & Guzmán, 2023). When teams create a strong jewellery brand image, it positively affects the loyalty formation of their fans (Bauer, Sauer, & Exler, 2005; Bauer et al., 2008; Mahmoudian, Sadeghi Boroujerdi, Mohammadi, Delshab, & Pyun, 2021). The importance of fan loyalty has been emphasised for teams to ensure sustainability and gain competitive advantage (Stevens & Rosenberger, 2012). Fan loyalty is a clear expression of fans' loyalty towards an object or person and their biases in both everyday and scientific discourses (Zhang et al., 2015). Loyal fans are unconditionally committed to both teams and athletes and support their products (Theysohn, Hinz, Nosworthy, & Kirchner, 2009). Bauer et al. (2008) divided fan loyalty into attitudinal and behavioural. The most appropriate construct to measure attitudinal loyalty is psychological commitment, which is defined as 'the tendency to resist preference change in response to conflicting information or experience' (Gahwiler & Havitz, 1998). When fans form a high level of commitment to their teams or athletes, they show a high level of psychological commitment even in case of failure. Behavioural loyalty shows past loyalty and future behavioural intentions such as participation, viewing or purchase intentions. Behavioural loyalty towards celebrity athletes results in fans and spectators following them on social media, watching them in the stadium or on television (Yun et al., 2021). Previous research has shown that team brand image is effective in creating attitudinal and behavioural fan loyalty (Bauer et al., 2008; Liu, Liu, Mo, Zhao, & Zhu, 2020; Wu, Tsai, & Hung, 2012; Yun et al., 2021). Thus, the following hypotheses were formed:

H4: Team brand image positively influences attitudinal fan loyalty.

H5: Team brand image positively influences behavioral fan loyalty.

Mediating Role of Team Brand Image

According to Keller (1993), the perception of brand image in consumers can directly and indirectly affect brand loyalty. Especially in the sports industry, the relationship that fans have with a particular footballer or sports brand plays an important role in shaping brand image (Biscaia, Correia, Ross, Rosado, & Maroco, 2013). The perception of athletes' personal brands as authentic can strengthen the image of the brand they represent (Carlson & Donovan, 2013). A strong brand image can increase fans' attitudinal and behavioural loyalty towards the brand (Heere & James, 2007). Thus, the following were hypothesised:

H6a: Brand image mediates the relationship between personal brand authenticity and attitudinal brand loyalty.

H6b: Brand image mediates the relationship between personal brand authenticity and behavioural brand loyalty.

The perception of sport celebrities such as footballers as authentic may lead fans to evaluate the brand image more favourably (Thomson, 2006). Positive perceptions of the brand increase consumer loyalty (Bauer et al., 2008). In this context, brand image, as an important variable in sports marketing, helps to understand the impact of both personal and celebrity authenticity on brand loyalty (Holt, 2004). Accordingly, hypotheses were put forward:

H7a: Brand image mediates the relationship between celebrity authenticity and attitudinal brand loyalty.

H7b: Brand image mediates the relationship between celebrity authenticity and behavioural brand loyalty.

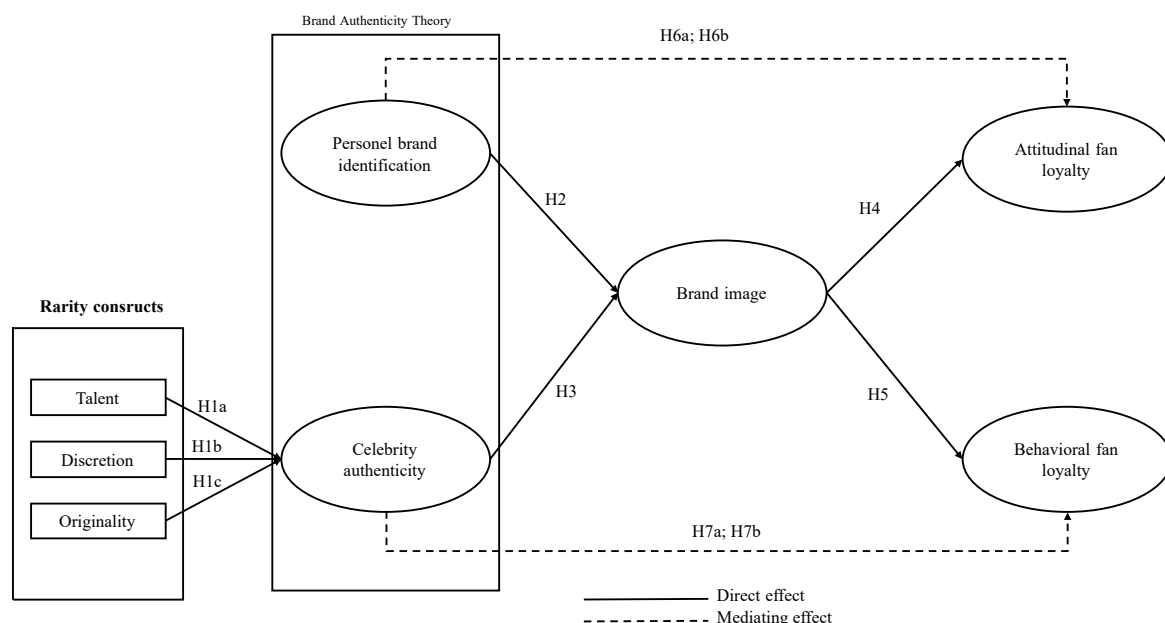


Figure 1: Research model

Method

Data Collection Procedure and Sampling

Only the fans of Galatasaray, Fenerbahçe, Beşiktaş and Trabzonspor teams in the Turkish Football Super League were selected as the sample group of the study. The reason for choosing these teams is that the players who are considered as celebrities usually take place in these football clubs. Purposive sampling was used to reach the fan group and those who were not fans of the above teams were excluded from the research. The questionnaires were created through Google Forms and the survey link was distributed through various social media platforms (WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, e-mail). Questionnaires were sent to 511 participants and 422 were returned. Participants who were under the age of 18 and who were not fans of the designated football teams were excluded from the study and the analysis was started with 408 participants. Hair et al. (2019) stated that 408 sample size is a sufficient number for structural equation modeling. In addition, G-power software was also used to perform model-specific power analyses to determine sample sizes and to calculate the minimum sample size. According to this analysis, the sample size is sufficient.

According to the demographic information of the fans, the participants consist of 48% (N=196) male and 52% (N=212) female fans. 48% (N=196) of the fans follow the matches of their teams regularly every week. In addition, 53.2% (N=217) have a licensed product of their team, while 46.8% (N=46.8) do not have a licensed product. The average age of the fans is 21,07±3,92.

Measurement Tools

In the study, data were collected by questionnaire method and the questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part includes personnel brand identification (3 items), celebrity authenticity (3 items), talent (2 items), discretion (3 items), originality (3 items), brand image (5 items), fan loyalty (attitudinal-6 items and behavioral loyalty-5 items) scales. Personnel brand identification, celebrity authenticity, talent, discretion and originality scales were adapted from Moulard et al. (2015). Brand image scale was adapted from Şimşek and Noyan (2009) and fan loyalty scale was adapted from Bauer et al. (2008). All scales were scored on a five-point Likert-type scale. In the second part, questions such as gender, age, the frequency of following their team's matches and the ownership of licensed products of their team were included.

Measurement items were revised from previous research in the context of this study. Since the research participants lived in Turkey, the scales in other languages were translated into Turkish. The translated scale questions were checked by three language experts. Then, to ensure face validity, the scales were examined by three academicians specialized in marketing. After the evaluations of the experts, ambiguous expressions were

corrected. The finalized questionnaire was piloted and distributed to 50 people and the participants were asked whether there were any unclear questions. As a result of these procedures, content validity was ensured. As a result of the pilot application, the factor loadings of the items of the scales were higher than 0.6 and the Cronbach Alpha internal consistency coefficients were above 0.7. These results showed that the questionnaire was suitable for large-scale data collection.

Common Method Bias (CMB)

In this research, both procedural and analytical strategies were employed to mitigate common method bias (CMB). As part of the procedural approach, participant anonymity was ensured. In the analytical phase, Harman's single-factor test was conducted using IBM SPSS 24.0 (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003), revealing that a single factor accounted for only 38.92% of the total variance. This outcome confirmed that no single factor explained more than 50% of the covariance among measurements (Doty & Glick, 1998). Additionally, variance inflation factor (VIF) values were examined, with all values remaining below the threshold of 3.3, aligning with recommendations by Kock (2015) to control CMB. Lastly, a common latent factor was incorporated into the model, and the comparison between models with and without this factor showed that differences in standardized factor loadings remained under 0.20 (Serrano Archimi, Reynaud, Yasin, & Bhatti, 2018). These findings collectively suggest that CMB does not pose a significant issue in this study.

Data Analysis

To assess the predicted relationships, analyses were conducted using a partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) approach supported by Smart-PLS® 3.2.8 software. PLS-SEM is a method that uses weighted composites of indicator variables to minimise unexplained variance and facilitate accountability for measurement errors (Hair Jr, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2021; Ringle, Wende, & Becker, 2015). This software also determines the constructs of the dependent variable and measures the effects of each independent variable on the dependent variable (Henseler, Ringle, & Sinkovics, 2009). In this model, Talent, Discretion, Originality, Personal Brand Identification, and Celebrity Authenticity are independent variables; Team Brand Image is an instrument (as well as a dependent variable); Attitudinal Fan Loyalty and Behavioral Fan Loyalty are dependent variables.

In the data analysis process, the measurement model was tested first. In this context, Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) were used for internal consistency, Average Variance Extracted (AVE) was used for convergent validity, and the Fornell-Larcker criterion and HTMT (Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio) analysis were used for discriminant validity. After the measurement model was found to be valid, the structural model test was performed, and the hypotheses were evaluated using path coefficients, t-values, and p-values. The explanatory power of

the model was examined using R^2 and Q^2 values. In addition, VAF (Variance Accounted For) analysis was performed to evaluate the mediating effects.

Ethical Statement

This research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Rectorate of Niğde Ömer Halisdemir University on 03.12.2024 with decision number 20.

Results

Partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) method was applied using Smart PLS 4 software to test the complex structural model and hypotheses proposed in the research and to evaluate the strength and direction of the relationships (Hair, Risher, Sarstedt, & Ringle, 2019). SEM is a widely used analysis technique for the verification of theoretical models in fields such as marketing, psychology, social sciences, and business administration (Akoğlu, Yildiz, & Kumar, 2024; Kumar & Hsieh, 2024).

Measurement model

External loadings, average variance extracted (AVE), composite reliability (CR) and discriminant validity were examined to ensure the validity and reliability of the measurement model. Factor loadings, AVE and CR values for convergent validity are

shown in Table 1. To evaluate the quality of the measurement model, Composite Reliability (CR) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) were calculated. CR assesses the internal consistency of the latent construct indicators and is considered a more accurate reliability estimator than Cronbach's Alpha, particularly in SEM using PLS (Hair et al., 2019). A CR value above 0.70 indicates that the construct has satisfactory internal consistency and that its indicators consistently measure the same underlying concept. On the other hand, AVE evaluates convergent validity, which refers to the degree to which multiple items measuring the same construct are in agreement. An AVE value above 0.50 suggests that the construct explains more than half of the variance of its indicators, which confirms that the latent variable adequately captures the intended concept (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). In this study, all constructs demonstrated CR values greater than 0.70 and AVE values above 0.50, supporting the reliability and convergent validity of the measurement model. These findings provide empirical evidence that the constructs are both consistent and valid representations of the theoretical concepts under investigation. (Hair et al., 2019). In addition, Cronbach's alpha values are also higher than the recommended value threshold of 0.7 (Eisinga, Grotenhuis, & Pelzer, 2013). These findings indicate that convergent validity was achieved (Table 1).

Table 1. Factor loading, validity, and reliability

Sub-dimensions	Items	Outer loading (>0.6)	Cronbach's alpha (>0.7)	CR (> 0.7)	AVE (> 0.5)
Personel brand identification	PBI1	0.929	0.919	0.949	0.861
	PBI2	0.934			
	PBI3	0.921			
Celebrity authenticity	CA1	0.920	0.920	0.949	0.851
	CA2	0.941			
	CA3	0.923			
Talent	T1	0.963	0.918	0.922	0.705
	T2	0.960			
Discretion	D1	0.880	0.858	0.914	0.779
	D2	0.893			
	D3	0.874			
Originality	O1	0.954	0.927	0.953	0.872
	O2	0.937			
	O3	0.910			
Brand image	BI1	0.870	0.951	0.963	0.837
	BI2	0.937			
	BI3	0.937			
	BI4	0.920			
	BI5	0.910			
Altitudinal fan loyalty	AFL3	0.865	0.893	0.922	0.705
	AFL4	0.898			
	AFL5	0.655			
	AFL6	0.823			
Behavioral fan loyalty	BFL1	0.694	0.836	0.887	0.665
	BFL2	0.898			
	BFL3	0.909			
	BFL4	0.855			
	BFL5	0.824			

Note (s): Factor loading, α = Cronbach's alpha, CR=Composite reliability and AVE=Average variance explained

In order to ensure discriminant validity, Fornell and Larcker (1981) criteria and heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) analysis, which are two generally accepted methods in the literature, were used. According to Fornell and Larcker (1981) criteria, each construct was determined to be different from the other constructs (Table 2). HTMT is a robust and widely recommended method for assessing discriminant validity, especially in PLS-SEM (Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015). In this study, all HTMT values were below 0.90, confirming that the constructs are not only internally consistent and convergent but also discriminantly valid, meaning they measure conceptually distinct dimensions as theorized Table 2).

Table 2. Discriminant validity (Fornell-Larcker criterion), Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT)

Constructs	PBI	CA	T	D	O	BI	AFL	BFL
Personel brand identification	0.928							
Celebrity authenticity	0.719	0.928						
Talent	0.630	0.852	0.961					
Discretion	0.564	0.613	0.660	0.882				
Originality	0.690	0.792	0.822	0.692	0.934			
Brand image	0.578	0.755	0.779	0.578	0.758	0.915		
Altitudinal fan loyalty	0.651	0.787	0.755	0.564	0.726	0.726	0.840	
Behavioral fan loyalty	0.691	0.701	0.649	0.568	0.674	0.658	0.777	0.816
Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT)								
Constructs	PBA	CA	T	D	O	BI	AFL	BFL
Personel brand identification								
Celebrity authenticity	0.780							
Talent	0.684	0.827						
Discretion	0.632	0.687	0.741					
Originality	0.746	0.857	0.891	0.777				
Brand image	0.688	0.807	0.833	0.639	0.807			
Altitudinal fan loyalty	0.722	0.865	0.828	0.645	0.790	0.734		
Behavioral fan loyalty	0.783	0.765	0.692	0.658	0.732	0.695	0.889	

Structural model

Table 3. Hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Paths	(β)	S.D	t-value	p	Reliability interval		Result
						(%2,5)	(%97,5)	
H1a	T → CA	0.615	0.055	11.125	0.000	0.491	0.705	Supported
H1b	D → CA	0.018	0.038	0.486	0.627	-0.053	0.096	Not supported
H1c	O → CA	0.274	0.056	4.918	0.000	0.172	0.393	Supported
H2	PBI → TBI	0.211	0.054	3.886	0.000	0.108	0.316	Supported
H3	CA → TBI	0.603	0.052	11.493	0.000	0.508	0.704	Supported
H4	TBI → AFL	0.726	0.029	25.410	0.000	0.671	0.779	Supported
H5	TBI → BFL	0.658	0.032	20.567	0.000	0.596	0.719	Supported

T=Talent; D=Discretion; O=Originality; CA= Celebrity authenticity; PBI= Personal brand identification; TI=Team brand image; AFL= Attitudinal fan loyalty; BFL= Behavioral fan loyalty

According to the findings presented in Table 3, talent (T) significantly influences celebrity authenticity (CA) (H1a: $\beta = 0.615$, $p < 0.001$), highlighting the importance of talent in shaping the perceived authenticity of a celebrity. Discretion (D) does not have a significant effect on celebrity authenticity (CA) (H1b: $\beta = 0.018$, $p = 0.627$), suggesting that discretion alone is insufficient to establish celebrity authenticity. However, originality (O) positively and significantly impacts celebrity authenticity (CA) (H1c: $\beta = 0.274$, $p < 0.001$), underlining the role of originality in creating an authentic celebrity image. Personal brand identification (PBI) has a significant positive effect on team brand image (TBI) (H2: $\beta = 0.211$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that authenticity in personal branding enhances the overall perception of the brand.

Furthermore, celebrity authenticity (CA) strongly predicts team brand image (TBI) (H3: $\beta = 0.603$, $p < 0.001$), showing that the authenticity of celebrities contributes significantly to the perceived image of the brand. TBI significantly influences attitudinal fan loyalty (AFL) (H4: $\beta = 0.726$, $p < 0.001$), which marks the strongest relationship in the model. This suggests that a positive brand image fosters emotional and psychological commitment among consumers. Finally, TBI also positively affects behavioral fan loyalty (BFL) (H5: $\beta = 0.658$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that a favorable perception of the brand translates into consistent purchasing behaviors and long-term consumer loyalty.

Table 4. Mediation testing

Hypothesis	Paths	<i>(β)</i>	S.D	t-value	p	Reliability interval		Result
						(%2,5)	(%97,5)	
	Total effect							
	PBI → AFL	0.180	0.049	3.769	0.000	0.079	0.269	
	PBI → BFL	0.400	0.052	7.638	0.000	0.306	0.502	
	CA → AFL	0.658	0.043	15.264	0.000	0.573	0.744	
	CA → BFL	0.404	0.053	7.693	0.000	0.301	0.496	
	Mediator: team brand image (TBI)							
	PBI→BI	0.211	0.054	3.886	0.000	0.108	0.316	
	CA→ BI	0.603	0.052	11.493	0.000	0.508	0.704	
	TBI→ AFL	0.726	0.029	25.410	0.000	0.671	0.779	
	TBI→BFL	0.658	0.032	20.567	0.000	0.596	0.719	
H6a	PBI→TBI→ AFL	0.058	0.017	3.414	0.001	0.028	0.094	Supported
H6b	PBI→TBI→ BFL	0.042	0.016	2.699	0.007	0.015	0.076	Supported
H7a	CA→TBI→ AFL	0.166	0.033	5.105	0.000	0.107	0.240	Supported
H7b	CA→TBI→ BFL	0.122	0.037	3.283	0.001	0.054	0.195	Supported

T=Talent; D=Discretion; O=Originality; CA= Celebrity authenticity; PBI= Personal brand identification; TI=Team brand image; AFL= Attitudinal fan loyalty; BFL= Behavioral fan loyalty

The mediation effect magnitude was assessed using Variance Accounted For (VAF) values, calculated as the ratio of indirect to total effects (Hair Jr, Hult, Ringle, Sarstedt, et al., 2021; Hayes, 2017). Table 4 presents all effects (direct, indirect, and total). A VAF below 20% indicates almost zero mediation, 20-80% suggests partial mediation, and above 80% indicates full mediation (Chawla & Joshi, 2023). The VAF for PBI→TBI→ AFL is 32.2% (total effect = 0.18, indirect effect = 0.06), indicating partial mediation. The VAF for PBI→TBI→ BFL is 10.5% (total effect = 0.40, indirect effect = 0.04), indicating zero mediation. The VAF for CA→TBI→ AFL is 25.2% (total effect = 0.66, indirect effect = 0.17), indicating partial mediation. Lastly, the VAF for CA→TBI→ BFL is 30.2% (total effect = 0.40, indirect effect = 0.12), indicating partial mediation.

Table 5. Predictive accuracy and relevance of the model

Endogenous latent constructs	R-Square	R-Square Adjusted	Q ²
CA	0.752	0.750	0.640
TBI	0.591	0.589	0.490
AFL	0.667	0.664	0.464
BFL	0.573	0.570	0.373

In Table 5, the predictive power of the model is evaluated with the help of R-square, Q². R² values are 75% for CA, 59% for BI, 67% for AFL and 57% for BFL. According to Hair Jr, Hult, Ringle, Sarstedt, et al. (2021), these values indicate that the predictive power of the model is medium and high. Stone-Geisser Q² (Stone, 1977) was used to determine the predictive fitness. Q² values indicate that the predictive fitness of the model is high (Akoglu & Özbek, 2024; Hair Jr, Hult, Ringle, Sarstedt, et al., 2021).

Discussion and Conclusion

This study aims to determine the effect of personal brand identity and celebrity authenticity on team image and fan loyalty.

The mediating effect of team image in this relationship was measured. In addition, the effect of rarity constructs on celebrity authenticity was analysed.

Accordingly, the prediction that the rarity constructs talent and originality will affect celebrity authenticity was confirmed, while the effect of discretion was not confirmed. Moulard et al. (2015) and Kucharska and Firgolska (2018) showed that all of the rarity constructs positively affect celebrity authenticity. The reason why discretion has no effect on celebrity authenticity in our research findings may be that the athletes who transfer to Turkish teams in the Turkish sample generally live their private lives openly. Contrary to expectations, the fact that the effect of the “discretion” dimension on the perception of authenticity was not statistically significant may indicate a tendency among the Turkish football community to recognize media-savvy athletes for their private lives. This situation provides a starting point for new research on how the local cultural context can shape the perception of authenticity.

The effect of personal brand identification and celebrity authenticity on the brand image of the club was confirmed in this study. Khan and Fatma (2023) showed the positive effect of brand identification on brand image in their research. In addition, contrary to our research results, Tu and Xu (2023) showed that brand identification mediated the relationship between brand loyalty and innovativeness perceived by smartphone consumers, but brand identification did not have a significant effect on brand image. Im, Kim, Jwa, and Gim (2022) revealed in their study that brand identity and brand image are closely related to each other and stated that effective brand identity positively affects the perception of brand image among consumers. Moulard et al. (2015) stated that the perception of celebrities as authentic will positively affect brand image. Illicic and Webster (2011) also stated that if the lifestyle and personality of celebrities are compatible with the brand, brand image will

be more positive by consumers and supported our research results. In addition, Kennedy et al. (2021), Cruikshank (2018) and Nichols and Shapiro (2023) obtained results that support our research results.

The positive effect of team brand image perceived positively by fans on attitudinal and behavioural fan loyalty is confirmed in this study. Bauer et al. (2008) and Yun et al. (2021) examined the effect of team image on fan loyalty and found that team image positively affects both attitudinal and behavioural loyalty of fans. Mostafavipour, Hezaveh, and Anzehaei (2023) found that team brand image significantly affects both attitudinal loyalty and behavioural loyalty. They emphasise that brand image mediates the relationship between fan loyalty and these loyalty types among Iran Premier Football League fans. Similarly, Irianto and Kartikasari (2020) showed that team brand image significantly affects both behavioural and attitudinal loyalty.

Our results show that team brand image plays an important role in the relationship between personal brand identity, celebrity authenticity and both attitudinal and behavioural fan loyalty. This mediating effect suggests that fans' perceptions of a team's image, athletes' personal brand identity and authenticity play an important role in increasing their loyalty to the team. Gladden and Funk (2001) showed that a strong team identity contributes to the formation of a positive image in the minds of fans, which in turn increases attitudinal commitment (e.g. emotional closeness, positive attitude). In addition, the perception of famous athletes or celebrities who are the face of the team as authentic (sincere, honest and harmonious) positively affects the image of the brand. Morhart et al. (2015) stated that celebrities perceived as authentic increase trust and image towards the brand, which contributes to consumer loyalty. Especially in sports, the perception that an authentic celebrity is integrated with the team can increase both behavioural loyalty (going to matches, purchasing products) and attitudinal loyalty (feeling connected) by strengthening the team brand image.

In conclusion, this study revealed how football celebrities' authenticity and personal brand identification influence fan loyalty through team brand image. The findings show that rarity elements such as talent and originality increase the perception of authenticity and that team image is a determinant of both attitudinal and behavioural loyalty. The results emphasise that clubs should pay attention not only to player performance but also to the congruence of players' images with club values and provide valuable suggestions for sports marketing practitioners in terms of player selection and brand management strategies.

Managerial Implications

The findings of this study provide some suggestions for managers and practitioners for fan behaviour, sports marketing and celebrity brand management. Firstly, the positive effect of a football celebrity's brand authenticity on team brand image and

fan loyalty may increase the desire of team managers to recruit famous athletes to their teams. In addition, it is important for athletes to invest in their authentic personal branding in order to increase the likelihood of being preferred by teams. In this respect, sports clubs and marketing teams are focusing on developing authentic and value-orientated brand identities for both their teams and their athletes and communicating these to fans (Moulard et al., 2015).

Moreover, the mediating role of team image shows that fans can be attracted to a club through celebrity player transfers. However, it is predicted that the sustainability of this loyalty depends on the compatibility of the player's image with the team image. Therefore, teams should balance the harmony between the image of the club and the personal image of the celebrity players and try to create a synergistic image among the fans (Carlson & Donavan, 2013).

In practice, team managers can capitalise on this relationship by actively using their team's celebrity players to build corporate brand equity and enhance team image with fans. The perceived authenticity and personal identity of celebrity players can increase fans' emotional attachment to the player and the team (Funk & James, 2001; Yoshida, Gordon, Nakazawa, & Biscaia, 2014).

Finally, considering the loyalty of fans to their teams and athletes, clubs should manage a crisis related to celebrity players by considering strategic communication methods. This may damage the overall brand image.

Limitations and Future Research

Although this research provides meaningful insights into the relationship between football celebrities' brand authenticity, team brand image and fan loyalty, it has some limitations.

Firstly, this research was conducted in the context of Turkey. Therefore, its generalisability for countries with different economic and cultural levels is limited. Therefore, comparisons can be made with different countries, different leagues and fan bases. In addition, the age groups of the participants are generally low and similar to each other. This limits the generalizability of the study. Future studies may include higher age groups. Secondly, since the study utilised a cross-sectional research design, causal inferences are limited. Future research could adopt longitudinal or experimental designs to examine how changes in a celebrity player's public image over time affect fan perceptions and loyalty. Thirdly, only celebrity player authenticity was analysed in this study. The institutional authenticity of the club and the brand value of the club were not considered. Therefore, in future research, the authenticity of the club and players can be considered differently and the interaction between them can be analysed. Fourth, while this study emphasised the mediating role of team brand image, other potentially influential mediators or moderators such as fan identity, emotional attachment

or social media engagement were not investigated. These variables may provide richer explanatory frameworks for future research.

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Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest between the authors in this study.

Author Contributions

Research Idea: HEA, Research Design: HEA, NK; Data Analysis: HEA; Manuscript Writing: NK, HEA; Critical Review: HEA

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