Designing a Qualitative Model of the Factors Affecting Psychological Commitment in Football Fans based on Grounded Theory

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Psychological commitment has been to date one of the interesting research topics in sports psychology. To achieve a deeper understanding of sports fans' psychological characteristics, this study aimed to design a qualitative model of the factors affecting psychological commitment in football fans in Iran based on grounded theory approach. In this qualitative-analytical study, 27 experts in the field of sports and fan loyalty in the Iranian Football Premier League from the top universities in Iran were interviewed based on purposive and triangulation sampling approach. The data analysis was also performed by open and axial coding, of which 53 concepts and 11 categories were classified under five general themes. The developed research model consisted of five major effective factors including: triggers, psychological characteristics, demographic characteristics, reference groups, and club-related issues. The results revealed that such factors could be the main actors shaping sports fans' psychological commitment.

Introduction

As a large, expanding, and booming phenomenon, sports have always attracted interested crowds across the world. Therefore, sports are being respected in all nations as one of the main indicators of development in terms of physical and mental health, and many researchers have thus far evidenced that sports can guarantee mental and sociocultural health in a country. In particular, football has been

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the most powerful phenomenon that has been able to shape many aspects of life. In this sense, the commercial, sociocultural, and even political impacts of football indicate the leading role of this game in today's modern society, in a way that its spectators and fans have been extensively investigated (Siefken, Junge, & Laemmle, 2019).

In relation to sport science research, the growing trend toward football has given rise to some topics and issues that are inherently psychosocial in nature, because sports with such unique features have been able to affect many social and psychological behaviors (Hassanzadeh, 2019). Among them, the factors and conditions inducing psychological commitment formation and maintenance in football fans have drawn much attention among researchers (Yun, Rosenberger, & Sweeney, 2020). Psychological commitment here refers to a very strong psychological and emotional connection developing in a person to a team, a sportsperson, or simply a sport. The extent of this type of commitment can be associated with an individual's being overwhelmed, so that finding one obsessed with a favorite sport or team, as if it were part of their being. Their presence and encouragement can even change the fate of some competitions. The fact that a person walks in bad weather, despite the long distance, alone, and merely because of their intense interest in watching a match, shows that such a behavior is not short-term or fleeting, and it has been repeated many times (Baena-Arroyo, García-Fernández, Gálvez-Ruiz, & Grimaldi-Puyana, 2020).

Psychological commitment has been defined by various researchers as equivalent to the term "fan loyalty" and a two-dimensional concept that contains behavioral and attitudinal loyalty(Baena-Arroyo et al., 2020; End & Foster, 2010). In this sense, behavioral loyalty represents repetitive behaviors, such as buying tickets, attending sports events, watching matches on TV, talking about sports, and even buying sports products, and attitudinal loyalty stands for commitment to a sport, a team, or a sportsperson, including the dimensions of individual choice, insisting on no change, and cognitive complexity (Mahony, Madrigal, & Howard, 2000; Sarı, Eskiler, & Soyer, 2011; Stevens & Rosenberger, 2012), described as the attitudinal dimension of fan loyalty by a fan's psychological commitment to a team. This type of commitment has been examined in numerous studies and illustrated as fans' in-depth psychological dependence on their team, which remains constant over time (Yun et al., 2020).

Given the weight of psychological commitment in boosting the sports industry revenue, researchers in psychology and sport management have attempted to identify the factors affecting loyalty, and much research has been so far fulfilled to address the question: "*What factors affect fan loyalty*?" For example, Tsiotsou (2014) mentioned services, public relations, club logo, and club image as the key elements in fan loyalty (Tsiotsou, 2013), and Wang et al. (2011) stated that interest in a team, the beauty of games, socialization, and sports knowledge, as the significant factors shaping psychological commitment(Wang, Zhang, & Tsuji, 2011). Other researchers have similarly reflected on some factors such as team character and brand identity (Keshtidar, Sahebkaran, Talebpour, & Kalashi, 2018), team brand image, fan engagement, level of satisfaction, sustainable involvement, team-related issues (Yun et al., 2020), celebrities and stars, team performance, and stadium attendance experience (Raizada, Tripathi, & Bagchi, 2020), personal factors (Asghari, Ghazanfari, Sharifi, & Ahmadi, 2021), the history of the club, jersey and logo positively influence loyalty towards a sports club (Reghunathan & Joseph, 2021).

Wilkins (2012) also reiterated that loyalty could be initially formed from social identity and the schemas that one creates. In this way, each person first learns numerous principles and behaviors in one's family. In the next stage, the scope of learning and personal identity improves following the expansion of individuals' relationships with their relatives and acquaintances, as well as friendship or other social groups (Wilkins, 2012). According to Wilkins (2012), loyal fans regard family and friends as the most effective factors in psychological commitment to their favorite teams(Wilkins, 2012).

Besides, fans travel long distances to watch their favorite football team's games because of their personal characteristics such as their emotional values (Salimi, Soltan Hosseini, Tayebi, & Rahimi, 2020), or customer experience and actions of social responsibility in a club, as the factors affecting loyalty (Moharramzadeh, Khodamoradpoor, & Kashef, 2017).

As Wang et al. (2011), loyalty necessitated three components, including involvement, satisfaction, and dependence. In the model explicated by Wang et al. (2011), such components could regulate the

development of fan loyalty in four stages, viz. start, enhancement, peak, and decline (Wang et al., 2011).

The review of the related literature also shows that research on fan loyalty has been thus far quantitative, using the survey method, and only a few factors have been outlined. The scatter of research in this field is obvious. With the development in the competitive entertaining industries compared with the sports industry, such as computer games, the accurate identification of the factors affecting loyalty; in other words, deep psychological commitment, can provide useful information to sports managers and psychologists. With the advent of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, staging football matches without spectators, and the reduction in communication between clubs and fans, there is a need for such research to shed light on a variety of factors affecting football fans' loyalty. Based on that, this study intends to identify important and influential factors affecting their psychological commitment to football, considering the important and effective role of spectators and sports fans in the development of the sports industry.

Methodology

This research was a qualitative-analytical research conducted based on grounded theory approach. In this qualitative-analytical study, 27 experts in the field of sports and fan loyalty in the Iranian Football Premier League from the top universities in Iran were interviewed based on ppurposive and triangulation sampling approach. Considering the relevance of qualitative research methods to discover the hidden complexities and the angles of a phenomenon and reflect on the lived experiences of individuals in the world of objective mind in this study, qualitative semi-structured interviews were used for data collection and theoretical sampling. The research participants included experts (9 people), managers (9 people), and fans (7 people). Among them, utilizing theoretical and purposive sampling methods, those with specialty to cooperate in this research, who expressed their willingness and readiness, were invited by phone calls, and informed about the topic of the study. Accordingly, the most suitable respondents were invited and interviewed. Due to the pandemic (i.e., COVID-19) conditions, face-to-face interviews were possible in only two cases, and other interviews were conducted during one or more phone and virtual calls. In order to create an atmosphere of trust and peace of mind, the interviewees were assured that all their responses would remain strictly confidential and anonymous. As the exact number of sampled individuals in qualitative research is not known and sampling is merely done in the study setting, the number of samples should be adequate to help explain and identify the problem, reach the desired saturation, and obtain no new data by increasing sample size. In this study, sampling continued until data saturation, so that the number of the participants reached 27 and the analysis was performed after completing the interviews. The data analysis was also a systematic and continuous process of data comparisons along with open and axial coding to answer the research questions. For the open coding, the transcribed interviews were read and the main statements were extracted and recorded as codes, and then, similar codes were placed into several categories. During the axial coding, the categories were linked to their subcategories to provide more accurate and full explanations of the phenomenon. In addition, in the axial coding, the initial categories formed during the open coding were either compared, and the similar ones were placed within a common axis. According to the modeling paradigm, it was necessary to pay much attention to the internal and external causal conditions of each category for all three groups at this stage. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), four criteria proposed in qualitative studies, viz. credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Hassanzadeh, 2019) was met in this study. For this purpose, theoretical sampling method, some explanations about the research objectives to the participants to gain their trust during the interviews, the review of continuous data, audio recording, data implementation and analysis immediately after the interviews, feedback for subsequent interviews, and the details related to the main and secondary concepts and themes were employed to enhance the dependability of the research findings. Data confirmability was also boosted by member checking, namely, the data were reviewed by seven experts available and using their

corrective opinions. To evaluate the transferability of the study, the results were provided to five experts, blinded to the study as the faculty members, who were asked to express their corrective views and share the results based on their experiences and knowledge. Regarding credibility, an attempt was made to present the interviews word by word in accordance with the topic of discussion in the findings section.

Results

Out of 27 participants in this study, there were eight faculty members from the Sport Management Department, three faculty members of the Sociology Department, four professionals and managers of the Iran Premier Football League, three members from the media, and seven members of fan groups, whose demographic characteristics are presented in **Table 1**.

Table 1. The frequency of the study participants' demographic characteristics

Demographic characteristics	University degree		Gender		Age (years old)		
	PhD degree	Master's degree and lower	Female	Male	30-40	40-50	Above 50
Sport Management Department	8	1	3	6	1	5	3
Sociology Department	3	1	0	4	0	3	1
Professionals and managers	0	4	0	4	0	2	2
Media members	0	3	0	3	2	1	0
Fan groups	1	6	0	7	4	3	0

To address the research questions, the interviews were conducted in a deep and continuous manner, using the interviewees' lived experiences. Upon analyzing the interviews, the concepts were sometimes extracted from one statement or one paragraph, and finally 80 concepts were obtained as the initial open codes. Then, the given concepts were combined, but the unrelated ones or those with commonalities were removed from the study and the processes of review, comparison, and conceptualization. Finally, 60 codes were acquired. Afterward, the concepts were theoretically and semantically reviewed, during several meetings with experts. At the end of the open coding process, a total number of 53 categories and 11 concepts were identified, as listed in **Table 2**.

Table 1. Open coding

Concepts	Final codes
Intra-team factors	Team-related, technical, and managerial factors
Management and planning	Financial management, planning, public relations, and media management
Reference groups	Family, friends, and peers
Marketing factors	Ticket cost, sports stadiums, matches, promotions, club members, physical evidence, and processes
External factors	Geographic, cultural, economic, legal, technological, and demographic factors
Fans' psychological characteristics	Motivation, perceptions, tendencies, sports and non-sports emotions, mental conflicts, and learning
Fans' demographic characteristics	Gender, race, religion, level of education, personality traits, family type, age, stage of life, occupation, social status, self-image, and individual values
Fans' decision-making process	Problem diagnosis, information retrieval, option evaluation, option selection, and outcomes

Spectators' buying behaviors	Buying tickets for matches, word-of-mouth marketing, re-attendance, buying club's products, paying more than is due, and following up on social media
Attitudinal loyalty	Psychological commitment
Maintenance	Database creation, relationship marketing, customer relationship management, and personal marketing

After the axial coding, the codes were analyzed and reduced by considering the research model according to the differences and similarities of the extracted categories. Then, a model of the factors affecting the psychological commitment of football fans was drawn, as illustrated in **Figure 1**.
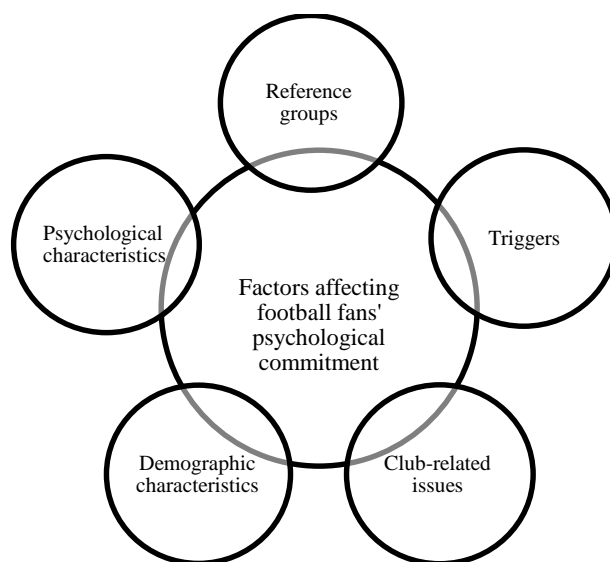

Figure 1. The modeling paradigm of the factors affecting football fans' psychological commitment based on research findings

Discussion and Conclusion

Psychological commitment and advocacy have been always one of the interesting topics welcomed in sports psychology. Fans' psychological commitment to the teams that have suffered consecutive defeats, or traveling long distances from one country to another to support a team or a club, etc. as well as a proper understanding of the factors affecting this feeling have been accordingly the subject of many studies, wherein sometimes one or more cases have been identified. This study was to have an in-depth look at the factors shaping the psychological commitment of football fans, grouped into five dimensions, as follows.

First Dimension - Reference Groups

The findings of this study identified family, friends and peer groups as reference groups affecting fans' sports commitment. This result was consistent with studies by Wilkins (2012), Tsiotsou (2014)(Tsiotsou, 2013; Wilkins, 2012). The first social group for people is their families, helping them to create social identity through social interactions. As stated by Wilkins (2012), social identity is defined as self-concept arising from individuals or their knowledge of membership in social groups along with the emotional value associated with it. In this theory, people behave a certain way in order to maintain or increase self-esteem(Wilkins, 2012). These groups can include family, friends, and peers, called reference groups as one of the primary concepts in this study. According to the study findings and the related literature, it was inferred that fans could establish a significant relationship with football and their favorite teams in their subconscious mind within themselves by being and communicating with family, and then friends and peers, which could lead to psychological commitment. One way suggested in social identity theory is friends or family's enthusiasm to wear team sports apparel, use its colors, attend or watch the games, and even get the news about players,

which can bring the image and name of the team and the sport into the individual's mind, and make them feel that they are an integral part of the team, as reported in Salimi et al. (2021), Raizada et al. (2020), and Baena-Arroyo et al. (2020)(Baena-Arroyo et al., 2020; Raizada et al., 2020; Salimi et al., 2020). Therefore, family involvement as well as friends' presence and interest in football at school can be an effective factor in shaping fan loyalty.

Second Dimension - Demographic Characteristics

Demographic factors, such as age, gender, level of education, personality traits, etc., were among the factors contributing to the fan loyalty model. In line with the research results of Tsiotsou (2014) and Yun et al. (2021), integrating several sources of information (e.g. gender and personality) could provide a schema, and each person could demonstrate a specific behavior by imitating these sources(Tsiotsou, 2013; Yun et al., 2020). Considering sports fans, such schemas could form their loyalty. In fact, the effects of these sources could shape fan behavior regardless of team wins or losses. Similarly, loyalty at some levels might be derived from the same source interference. In Salimi et al.'s (2021) and Asgari et al.'s (2022) studies, personality traits such as introversion or extroversion were examined, but in this study, the details of personality traits were not examined, which can be used for further research, to be suggested(Asghari et al., 2021; Salimi et al., 2020).

Third Dimension - Psychological Characteristics

Consistent with the research of Yun et al. (2020) and Wang et al. (2011) who pointed to psychological characteristics such as sports knowledge, excitement, game attractiveness and gaining experience, this study also showed that psychological factors are one of the important factors on commitment. Is the mentality of the fans; although these studies were not performed on sports fans and different populations were examined, the output was consistent and pointed to a similar result (Wang et al., 2011; Yun et al., 2020).

Psychological characteristics are one of the main reasons behind human behavior. This phenomenon was studied in the fan loyalty model and the results distinguished five concepts of motivation, perceptions, tendencies, sports and non-sports emotions, mental conflicts, and learning. The motivation here is a broad concept, comprised of several other terms, such as needs, interests, values, preferences, desires, and incentives that help describe the factors influencing a person's energy and guide their behavior. In sports fans, motivation is directly induced by fans themselves and indirectly by empathy with the team and loyalty as cited in End and Foster (2010), Wilkins (2012), and Keshtikar et al. (2018)(End & Foster, 2010; Keshtidar et al., 2018; Wilkins, 2012). This can affect the participation of individuals and their activities, and even an individual's pleasure, peace of mind, and liberation. With reference to Salimi et al. (2021) and Baena-Arroyo et al. (2020), sports fans' behaviors were attributable to their psychological characteristics(Baena-Arroyo et al., 2020; Salimi et al., 2020). The present study also found these factors effective in developing a fan loyalty model if managers and planners could use them as a behavioral guide to attract more fans and strengthen their loyalty. Once loyal fans enter the stadiums with entertainment motivation in addition to psychological commitment, the management can provide them with fun programs. An example can be seen in the spending and planning that go into opening and closing ceremonies for competitions or performance groups in the half time. Most organizations are also well aware that relying on fan loyalty and attractiveness of the game alone cannot lead to a successful and satisfactory program in the long run. Therefore, some arrangements need to be made with the aim of raising feelings and motivations in fans and setting the favorable conditions for loyal ones. Such perceptions might gradually give rise to mental conflicts in individuals, and it would lead to a two-way relationship as these conflicts increase, which is beneficial to both sides.

Fourth Dimension - Club-Related Factors

This dimension included team-related, technical, managerial factors, reflecting on some basic concepts such as team reputation, stars, honors, attractiveness of the games, social responsibility, and so on that investigated in this research. In this respect, Consistent with the research of Reghunathan and Joseph (2021), teams endowed with more history and honors in the league will definitely have more fans, particularly loyal ones as strong and committed supporters of the team in all circumstances.

This psychological connection and commitment is sometimes due to the presence of sports stars in teams, which doubles the attractiveness of the games (Reghunathan & Joseph, 2021). That is why the most successful club managers, like those in Real Madrid CF, spend much money each year to attract sports stars, because they have realized that the presence of stars increases the chances of victory and championship as well as the charm of the games, which can consequently encourage many loyal fans to watch their favorite team's games in the league. What Juventus FC did in 2018 by attracting Cristiano Ronaldo, which multiplied the team's fans by 68%, and even the number of followers of the club's account on Instagram increased from 49.7 to 83.8 million is another example. Therefore, successful managers choose the best and most valuable options during transfers because they are well aware of their psychological outcomes; as researches of Tsiotsou (2014) and Raizada (2020), are in line with the research results(Raizada et al., 2020; Tsiotsou, 2013). Moreover, there were 12 concepts in technical factors, including issues related to sports stadiums and quality of services, the time and date of the games, etc., which could play an important role in creating fan loyalty that Keshtidar (2018), Raizada (2020) and Reghunathan and Joseph (2021) showed the same results. Unfortunately, many studies have reported that the teams in the Iranian Football Premier League do not have an equipped stadium to meet the standards announced by the Asian Football Confederation, and there are only a handful of independent ones(Keshtidar et al., 2018; Raizada et al., 2020; Reghunathan & Joseph, 2021). Therefore, it is worth paying much attention to such issues in programs for the league performance development. Another important point is competitive balance, as an important element that takes the league out of the bipolar or multipolar nature of the competitions, creates the conditions that make the results of the competitions unpredictable, and draws the attention of spectators and then the media and sponsors. As a result, league managers need to consider planning for this purpose. In terms of managerial factors, some concepts such as league management, financial management and planning, public relations, and media management were addressed. In this respect, league management was identified with 11 basic concepts such as coaches and players, localization, corruption, accountability, etc. Management is also among the key elements of organizational success and it is expected to respond to the processes of implementing programs and fighting corruption in all organizations and societies. The league can also take small steps by donating a portion of the ticket sales revenue to the city's sports boards to meet the localization purposes although this is not enough. In successful leagues, search committees to find talents are also established in the clubs of each city, and stadiums with high-quality grass fields are constructed to help in localizing football and attracting more fans.

However, sports psychologists may be unaware of the psychological impact of financial issues on fan behavior. In this sense, financial management is the main element in providing organizational resources. Among the concepts in this section are attracting sponsors, reaching transparency, and developing financial health. Short- and long-term planning to achieve such goals will also introduce the organization as a growing one. No fan likes to be the supporter of a team that always fails to achieve its goals or sets unlikely goals. In the meantime, paying attention to public relations and media management can remove a heavy burden from the organizations' shoulders. Public relations should thus act in the best possible way in the field of announcing and holding events. In this context, four concepts such as making music videos, staging cultural programs in stadiums, etc. were identified. Considering media management, nine concepts such as promotion, ethics, neutrality in dealing with the media, etc. were also acknowledged. Management should thus consider that an organization's reputation might be challenged in the case of inappropriate treatment and neglect of the media because there are shield laws that protect journalists around the world. Therefore, the study results revealed that the media should be properly managed in line with the goals of the public relations, and the interview programs ought to be arranged after the games with the presence of coaches and players and the maximum welfare should be provided for the media. Such programs also show the loyal fans that the organization has nothing to hide and will consequently strengthen their sense of commitment by creating the feeling of being at one with the sports organization.

Fifth Dimension - Triggers

In this dimension, there were two concepts, internal and external triggers investigated. The external triggers refer to the elements occurring in the social context wherein a person is born which was also expressed in Research Wilkins (2012) and Asgari et al. (2022) (Asghari et al., 2021; Wilkins, 2012). The community and the factors determined by it could accordingly shape the levels of fan loyalty. In this study, geographic, cultural, economic, legal, technological, and demographic factors were identified as the external triggers that could play a role in designing a fan loyalty model. In line Raizada et al. (2020), had also found that local teams could always have the largest number of loyal fans from the same place or city (Raizada et al., 2020). As well, Yun et al. (2021) and Salimi et al. (2021) had concluded that level of education, income, age, and race as demographic factors could affect fan loyalty (Salimi et al., 2020; Yun et al., 2020). In addition, culture and economy, as other factors, e.g., social class and agents, could influence this commitment. Technological factors such as equipment and innovation were further effective in directing the interviewees' opinions. The important point was the presence of agents within the concept of economic factors. Undoubtedly, discipline and legal stability are essential, and disorder along with non-coherent laws that fail to be well enforced will always lead to chaos. In this regard, football agents are the main problem, and failure to deal with agents violating laws is evident. In this regard, no transparency in club contracts, tax avoidance, inadequate advocacy, lack of enforcement laws, as well as defects in the formulation and implementation of disciplinary and civil rules and regulations have contributed to the spread of these problems. This instability and chaos can have only one end result, that is, fans' anger. A loyal fan accordingly considers oneself to support a team in any situation, and there is nothing worse than the feelings and attitudes of the loyal ones being damaged by the incompetence of some in terms of enforcing laws. Toppling financial corruption can thus bring financial health to football.

Considering other external factors, marketing ones were identified. Although there is ample evidence that ticket costs have little effect on the presence of loyal fans in sports stadiums, prices should change only in a reasonable manner. In some football leagues such as La Liga in Spain, the base ticket price for each match is announced and then the management can determine a rational increase based on the attractiveness of the games (products), the quality of the stadiums (physical evidence), and the sensitivity of the games. Other marketing activities such as promotion and staff as well as location were also other important factors identified in this section. According to Yun et al. (2020), there is a need to design marketing activities based on loyal fans' attitudes if a club is to attract and retain them(Yun et al., 2020).

In terms of internal triggers, fans' decision-making process, buying behaviors, and attitudinal loyalty were obtained from the study findings. Fans are always looking for some behaviors to show that they support a team, for example, they wear the apparel bearing the logo of their favorite team or buy the signed images of their favorite players at a high price from big auctions. In their spare time, loyal fans also choose related activities. These behaviors (from buying match tickets to supporting a favorite team in the company of friends) are to show everyone that the fans are loyal, so loyalty emerges as a behavior. Hence, it is inferred that internal triggers are the attitudinal loyalty that has influenced one's behavior and speech.

In general, this study outlined five dimensions and concepts governing the loyalty of football fans. Upon careful examination, it is realized that some factors have been constantly involved since the birth of a person, and the most important of these cases are the family as the reference group. Therefore, first, the managers and planners of sport clubs are suggested to pave the way for the presence of families with their children in sports stadiums in order to engage their minds and create motives and schema to become a loyal fan in the future. In addition, some other factors were directly influenced by the management and intra-club planning, so managers are expected to pay special

attention to managerial and technical issues. Finally, the government can significantly reduce crimes by encouraging people in the community to play sports in order to have a healthy society. It is also suggested to examine the effect and priority of each factor identified in this study among fans using a quantitative method. Other popular sports in Iran such as volleyball, wrestling, and so on can be further investigated in similar studies.

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