EXPLORING BRAND ASSOCIATIONS IN LOCAL SOCCER TEAM[1][2]

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Abstract

Branding soccer teams and soccer team brand management are becoming important in recent days. There are many soccer clubs with million-dollar brand values in the sports industry. Brand image can be defined as association sets in the minds of consumers. In order to understand brand image, it is therefore necessary to identify such association sets. This study set out to identify brand association sets for a local soccer team called Eskişehirspor. Data was collected from 159 participants by utilizing a mind mapping survey and analyzing with a social network analysis technique. In the first stage of analysis, each mind mapping survey was content analyzed. The unit of analysis in the survey was each association filled in by the respondents. Associations explored in the content analysis were accepted as nodes and connections between association were accepted as ties for the network analysis. Fifteen brand associations were identified for Eskişehirspor. According to the results, fan identification, club logo and colors, culture and values are the central brand associations. Findings show that the prominence of attributed types of brand associations match Keller's categorization of types in this context. This study presents an opportunity for others to evaluate the soccer teams in order to make an assessment of Turkish football industry.

Key Words: Brand image, brand associations, social network analysis, sport.

YEREL FUTBOL TAKIMI MARKA ÇAĞRIŞIMLARININ KEŞFEDİLMESİ

Öz

Son dönemlerde futbol takımlarının markalanması ve marka yönetimleri önemli hale gelmeye başlamıştır. Spor endüstrisi içinde marka değeri milyon doları bulan futbol takımları vardır. Marka imajı tüketici zihnindeki çağrışım setleri olarak tanımlanabilir. Marka imajı anlamak için, bu çağrışım setlerinin neler olduğunun tanımlanması gereklidir. Bu çalışma Eskişehirspor futbol takımının marka çağrışımlarının tanımlanmasına yöneliktir. Veri, zihin haritası yöntemi kullanılarak 159 katılımcıdan toplanmış ve sosyal ağ analizi tekniği ile analiz edilmiştir. Analiz sürecinin ilk aşamasında her bir zihin haritası anketine

içerik analizi uygulanmıştır. Analiz birimi olarak her bir ankette doldurulan çağrışımlar kabul edilmiştir. İçerik analizi sonucunda tanımlanan çağrışımlar sosyal ağ analizinde düğümler, çağrışımlar arasındaki ilişkiler de ayırt olarak kabul edilmiştir. Eskişehirspor için 15 marka çağrışımı tanımlanmıştır. Analiz sonuçlarına göre taraftar kimliği, kulüp, logo ve renkleri, kültür ve değerler en merkezde yer alan çağrışımlardır. Bu çalışmada elde edilen marka çağrışım kategorileri Keller'in çağrışım kategorileri ile uyum göstermektedir. Bu çalışma ayrıca futbol takımları üzerinden Türk Futbol endüstrisi hakkında bir değerlendirme yapmak isteyenlere bir fırsat sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Marka imajı, marka çağrışımları, sosyal ağ analizi, spor.

INTRODUCTION

The application of brand and brand management has been studied for many years, in an expanding number of areas. The relevance of brand and brand management has increased especially in the field of sport, as an important type of hedonistic service industry (Wang and Tang, 2017).

Nowadays, branding and brand management of soccer teams has become important. According to the findings of the 'Most Valuable Sports Team, 2017', the brand value of Manchester United is 564 million dollars and that of Barcelona is 537 million dollars[5]. Under these circumstances, sport teams have started to give importance to brand management, especially brand image. In a broad view, brand image can be defined as the set of brand associations in consumers' minds (Keller, 1993). A strong brand image creates strategic positions and specific perceptual associations in consumers' minds and these associations provide product line extension opportunities. Additionally, a strong brand image and brand association ensures brand loyalty and, as a result of brand loyalty, a price premium can be charged (Handersen, Lacobucci and Calder, 1998; Aaker, 1991). In the context of the effects of brand image, this study aims to explore the brand associations of a local soccer team called Eskişehirspor.

1. Conceptual Framework

According to the American Marketing Association (AMA) a brand is a "name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from the competition" (Keller,

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[5] https://www.statista.com/statistics/278027/brand-value-of-sport-teams--franchises-worldwide/ (Date of Access: 1.4.2018)

2008:3). Similarly, Aaker (1991:7) defines brand as a distinguishing name and/or symbol intended to identify the goods or services of either one seller or a group of sellers, and to differentiate those goods or services from those of other sellers. Keller (2008:4) defines brand as adding dimensions that differentiate it in same way from other products designed to satisfy the same need.

In order to understand the brand image concept, it is necessary to talk about brand equity. Brand equity gives us a conceptual framework to measure the added value a brand contributes to a product and service (Bauer, Sauer and Schmitt, 2005). Two important studies of brand equity are those of Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993).

Aaker (1991:15) defines brand equity as a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and to that firm's customers. His proposed brand equity concept (Aaker 1991:16) includes four brand assets:

i. Brand loyalty
ii. Brand awareness
iii. Perceived quality
iv. Brand associations

Keller (1993) proposes "consumer-based brand equity" based on consumer knowledge. According to Keller (1993:2), consumer-based brand equity is the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of brand. He argues that brand knowledge consists of two important concepts: brand awareness and brand image. Brand awareness relates to brand recall and recognition performance by the consumer. Brand image refers to the set of associations linked to the brand in the mind of the consumer.

Brand image and brand associations are related. Aaker (1991:109) defines brand associations as anything linked in memory to brand. Associations are inferred from physical characteristics of the product or communication activities by the consumer. Besides the marketers' controlled sources of information, brand associations can also be created in a variety of other ways: by direct experience, from information communicated about the brand from the firm or other commercial sources, word of mouth and inferences from the brand itself (Keller, 2008:70).

Keller (1993:4) divides brand associations into three categories: attributes, benefits and attitudes. Attributes are those descriptive features that characterize a product or service –

what a consumer thinks the product or service is or has and what is involved with its purchase or consumption. Benefits are the personal value consumers attach to the product or service attributes – that is, what consumers think the product or service can do for them. Attitudes are consumers' overall evaluations of a brand.

In recent days, brand equity and brand image were studied broadly in sports literature. One of the first studies about brand equity in sport was Gladden, Milne and Sutton's 1998 study, which developed a model for sport teams based on Aaker's (1991) brand equity model and established that team-related factors (success, head coach, star player), organization-related factors (reputation and tradition, conference and schedule, entertainment package/ product delivery) and market-related factors (media coverage, geographic location, competitive forces, support) are antecedents of brand equity in sport. Wang and Tang (2017) found that identification with the team and identification with the team brand were significant indicators of sports team brand equity.

Gladden and Funk (2001) examined the relationship between brand associations and brand loyalty in US professional sport. They studied the relationship between 13 brand association dimensions and brand loyalty, and found positive relationships between fan identification, escape, nostalgia, product delivery, and brand loyalty, and negative relationships between tradition, star players, peer group acceptance, and brand loyalty.

To measure brand association, Gladden and Funk (2002) propose 16 constructs based on Keller (1993)'s consumer-based brand equity framework. These 16 constructs fall into Keller (1993)'s categorization of brand associations: attributes, benefits, attitudes (Table 1)

Table 1. *Brand Associations Constructs for Sport Team*

Benefit	Fun identification
	Nostalgia
	Pride in place
	Escape
	Peer group acceptance
Attitudes	Importance
	Knowledge
	Affect
Attributes	Product delivery
	Star player
	Logo design
	Management
	Head coach
	Tradition
	Success
	Stadium/Arena

Source: Gladden & Funk, (2002).

Bauer, Sauer and Exler (2005) argue that a soccer club's brand image can be measured through three factors, product-related attributes, non-product-related attributes and benefits. Bauer, Sauer and Exler (2005) found that variables that belong to the product-related attributes are team (members) and general team performance (team play), head coach and success. Non-product-related attributes are fans, logo and club colors, club history and tradition, and stadium. Benefits were identified as identification, peer group acceptance, escape, socializing/companionship, emotions, nostalgia and entertainment. Later, Bauer, Sauer and Exler (2008) identify 20 items which are important for sports team brand image including team, head coach, success, star player, team performance, club logo and colors, club history and tradition, stadium, fans, fun identification, peer group acceptance, escape, socializing, emotions, nostalgia, entertainment, uniqueness, trustworthiness, positivity, likeability. This study tried to find out brand associations of Eskişehirspor with using of social network analysis.

2. Methodology

The aim of this study to explore brand associations in the consumer's mind of the local soccer team called Eskişehirspor. In order to this, free association task technique was used as suggested by Keller (1993:14). Mind mapping survey was used for free association. A mind mapping survey sheet was designed and respondents are instructed to fill in certain number of associations regarding the soccer team in the five boxes provided in the sheet. After listing associations respondents were instructed to draw a connection among each pair of associations if they thought there were any (Guo, 2012: 622). With this survey, not only associations were explored, but also connections of between them were explored. A total of 167 survey forms were distributed and 159 completed forms were used for analysis. Respondents were chosen by convenience sampling method.

Social network analysis technique was used for data analysis. Network analysis displays relationships as consisting of nodes (individuals or organizations) and ties (which are also called links or edges). These nodes represent actors within the networks, and ties represent the relationships between them (Kadry, 2014).

In the first stage of analysis, each mind mapping survey was content analyzed. The unit of analysis in the survey was each association listed by the respondents. Categories were defined according to the studies made by Gladden and Funk (2002) and Bauer, Sauer and Exler (2005)'s studies. Fifteen categories were defined: success, star player, head coach, team, team performance, management, club logo and colors, stadium, history and tradition, culture and values, pride in place, fan identification, nostalgia, socializing, emotions. Operational definition selected categories are listed as follows.

Success: Any expressions related with winning

Star Player: Having star player, remembering name of star player

Head coach: Having well known coach, remembering head coach name

Team: How the team goes about scoring, and specific characteristics that may be ascribed to the team's play.

Team performance: The perceived quality of the team itself.

Management: Thoughts regarding the management.

Logo and colors:	Thoughts regarding the identifying mark such as the logo, symbol, and the colors
Stadium:	Any opinions expressed about the stadium
History and tradition:	Historical thoughts regarding the team, the history of success
Culture and values:	Thoughts regarding the club's culture and values
Pride in Place:	Thoughts regarding having a local or regional team
Fan identification:	Expression and definitions about fan or specific fan groups
Nostalgia:	Expression of good memories about team
Socializing:	Expressions about developing and maintaining relations with other fans' social interaction with friends and other fans
Emotions:	Experiences about emotions like joy, pride, ecstasy, anger, frustration, worry and shame.

In the second stage of analysis, associations explored in the content analysis, were accepted as nodes and connections between associations were accepted as ties for the network analysis. A symmetrical matrix was then created. Network analysis matrices, depending on number (N) of predefined attributes under the study, include N rows x N columns. In this study 15 brand associations were defined and matrices incudes 15 rows and 15 columns. Data was analyzed with network analysis software UciNet and NetDraw.

Centrality is an important measurement concept in network analysis. Centrality concept in network analysis is identification of the most important actors in a network (Wasserman and Faust, 1994). One of the centrality measurement tools is "degree centrality". Degree centrality considers nodes with the highest degrees (number of adjacent edges) as the most central (Kadry, 2014: 19). The more ties an attribute has with other elements, the more centrally it is located in the network (Guo, 2012: 625). "Density" measurement can be used in order to identify overall level of connection within the network.

3. Findings

Table 2. *Degree Centrality of Associations*

Fan identification	138
Logo and colors	98
Culture and values	78
Pride in Place	77
Nostalgia	62
Team performance	51
Stadium	37
Emotions	35
Star player	28
Management	25
History and tradition	14
Socializing	11
Team	8
Success	5
Head coach	5

According to the degree centrality measurement, fan identification, logo and colors, culture and values are the central brand associations. The density value of the network is 3.20. Visual representation contributes to better understanding the network, since visualization tools can be used to change size, colors, layout and other attributes (Kadry, 2014: 25). Visualization of network data gives better understanding of what the networks look like (Figure 1).
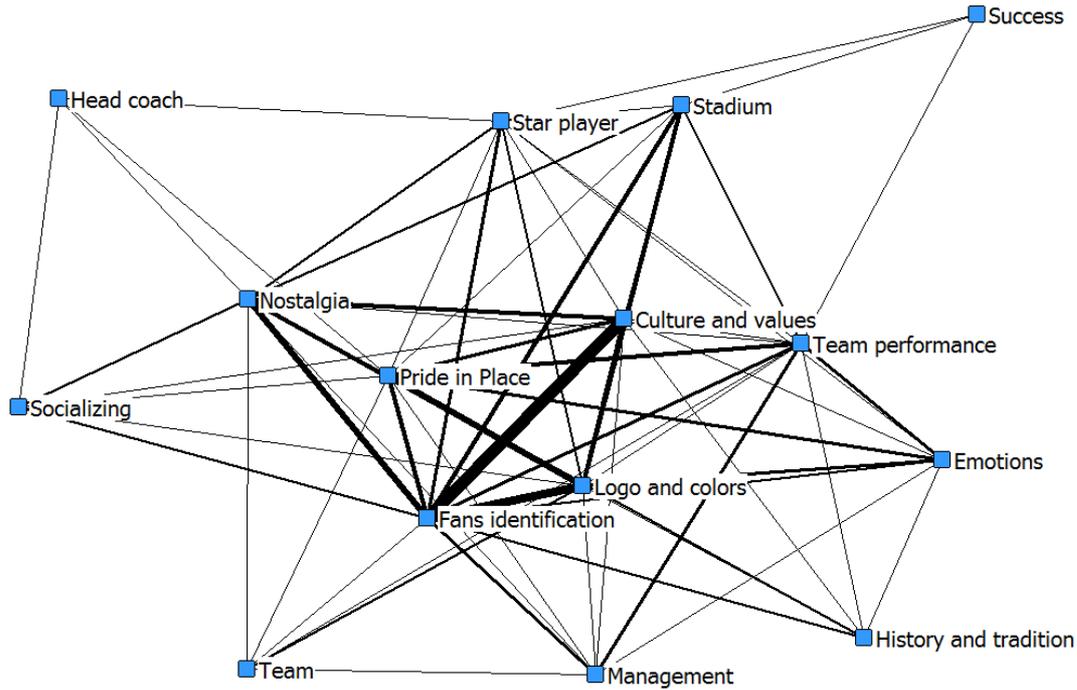
Figure 1. *Brand Associations Network*

The thickness of lines shows the strength of connection of brand associations. According to the brand associations network visual, fan identification and culture and values constitute the most connected brand association in consumers' minds.

4. Conclusion

Brand image is the set of associations related with brand in the mind of the consumer (Keller, 1993). To explore brand image its necessary to find out associations in consumer mind. Branding and brand management for sport teams are increasing and consumers have some brand association related with sport teams in their minds. This study set out to identify brand association sets of the local soccer team in consumers' minds.

According to the results, fan identification is central brand association. The studies of Gladden and Funk (2001) and Bauer, Sauer and Exler (2005) give us a structured brand association measurement tool. This study shows connections and strength of connections of brand associations in consumers' minds. This is crucial for current research. Results showed that fan identification and culture and values are the most connected brand associations.

According to the results, social network analysis has strong advantage to show the associations related to the team in the consumer mind and the connections between them. But, on the other hand free association technique has limitation because fans can recall everything about not only team but also the rivals.

In this study, explored brand associations were not classified as negative or positive. Future research should consider negative or positive brand associations' classifications. Additionally, relationship between brand associations and brand loyalty, activity participation, team brand personality should be investigated.

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