

Research article

Fan Engagement and Loyalty in Football: The Mediating Role of Satisfaction

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Abstract: The topic of the research is anchored in the Psychological Continuum Model and focuses on investigating the way the emotional and behavioral engagement impacts the satisfaction and long term commitment to a favorite club. The research uses data collected from 218 supporters of a professional football club. Other relevant indicators of the study are: Cronbach's from 0.88 to 0.91 showing a high internal consistency. The research shows that supporters' engagement can be considered a prediction factor of satisfaction, while the satisfaction is a key indicator predicting loyalty. The link between these two is satisfaction, which can be considered a confirmation of the mediating function that satisfaction plays in the proposed model. The results prove that the perceived experience quality and emotional connection count decisively in the loyalty maintenance of long term support. Overall, the study brings practical information relevant to sport managers, emphasizing how a rich fan experience and authentic involvement can drive loyalty maintenance and stronger community identity directed towards football clubs.

Keywords: fan engagement, satisfaction, loyalty, social identity, football

1. Introduction

Football functions as an important cultural and social institution, shaping collective identity, emotion, and belonging across communities. In Europe, football clubs represent symbols of local pride and continuity across generations, which makes understanding supporter behavior and long-term commitment essential for sport management professionals [1]. Fan engagement is a multidimensional construct encompassing emotional, cognitive, and behavioral involvement. It determines the intensity and quality of fans' interaction with sport entities and contributing to co-created value in the sport experience [2].

Despite extensive research on fan behavior, existing studies rarely integrate emotional and behavioral engagement with satisfaction and loyalty into a single managerial model grounded in the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM). Moreover, Eastern European football—with its distinct organizational structures and supporter dynamics—remains underrepresented in engagement–satisfaction–loyalty research [3,4]. This gap limits the understanding of how engagement translates into long-term loyalty in environments characterized by strong identification, fluctuating performance, and varied managerial practices.

Engagement differs from traditional loyalty through its proactive nature: while loyalty traditionally reflects post-purchase evaluation, engagement precedes it and involves direct participation and meaning construction between supporters and clubs

[5,6]. Satisfaction emerges from perceived service quality, atmosphere, social connection, and managerial fairness [7,8,9], and has been shown to mediate the link between engagement and loyalty by stabilizing emotional involvement and reinforcing behavioral commitment [10]. Loyalty itself manifests through attendance, financial support, and ambassadorial behavior, shaping brand equity and organizational sustainability [11].

Although contextual differences exist, particularly within Eastern European leagues, they primarily relate to socio-organizational conditions rather than altering the core psychological mechanisms [3,4]. Thus, the regional setting informs but does not dominate the analytical framework, allowing the model to remain theoretically consistent while capturing relevant contextual nuances [12].

The objective of this study is to examine how emotional and behavioral engagement influence satisfaction and loyalty among football supporters, and to determine whether satisfaction mediates the engagement–loyalty relationship within a professional Eastern European club. By combining affective and managerial perspectives, the study offers empirical evidence relevant to sport organizations seeking to enhance loyalty through meaningful supporter experiences.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

The hereby study was conducted among the supporters of a professional football club from a former communist country located in Southeastern Europe, a high ranking football club in that country in terms of popularity. According to the structure of the national football federation in that country, the league system is organized into three professional tiers (League I, II, and III), comprising over 130 clubs. The analyzed club has a long-standing tradition and a solid community identity.

For ethical and institutional reasons, the club's identity is anonymized to prevent reputational risks and protect the fan community.

The analyzed data was collected throughout 3 months (September – November 2024) during the national football season. A total of 246 questionnaires were distributed to respondents in online and offline. 218 valid responses were collected back, while the remaining were either not returned or considered incomplete submissions. The demographics of the study include:

- age between 18 and 55 years ($M = 29.4$);
- 71% male and 29% female.

The sample is considered broadly representative of the club's active fan base, as its demographic profile closely mirrors the age, gender distribution, attendance frequency, and community composition reported in the club's annual public communications and supporter association data.

Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous.

2.2. Instrument

A quantitative study used a structured questionnaire designed to measure three latent variables: fan engagement, fan satisfaction, and fan loyalty. A total of 18 items were included, all drawn from validated scales widely used in sport management literature. Engagement items derived from the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) framework [13], satisfaction items were based on the Sport Service Satisfaction Scale [14], and loyalty items followed the structure proposed by Bee and Havitz [15].

To provide a clearer understanding of the item content, the questionnaire used in the study is presented in Appendix 1.

Because the original scales were developed primarily in Western contexts, minor wording adjustments were made to ensure clarity and contextual relevance for supporters in an Eastern European football environment. These adjustments involved:

- simplifying specific terms that lacked direct equivalents in Romanian fan communication;
- rephrasing long or complex items to increase readability;
- aligning terminology with phrasing commonly used by local supporters;
- without altering the conceptual meaning of the items or the theoretical integrity of the original scales.

A pilot test with 20 participants confirmed the clarity and internal consistency of the adapted instrument (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.91$ for engagement, 0.88 for satisfaction, and 0.90 for loyalty), exceeding recommended thresholds [16].

2.3. Procedure

To maximize accessibility for participants, the survey was distributed through two channels—online and in-person—using the same instrument, structure, and response format for all respondents. Participants completed the questionnaire either at two home matches during the 2024 national season or by accessing the secure Google Forms link shared through the club's supporter community and affiliated social media channels. All participants were informed about the academic purpose of the study and the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses. All completed questionnaires were coded and analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 28.0.

The online recruitment followed a controlled and standardized distribution strategy. The survey link was shared through the club's official supporter community, its verified Facebook page, and dedicated fan groups administered by the club, using a standard informational message and without incentives for participation. To prevent duplicate or non-authentic entries, each device was restricted to a single submission, completion times were monitored to flag automated or extremely short responses, and entries were manually screened for inconsistencies. No suspicious, duplicate, or non-authentic responses were identified during the data cleaning stage.

2.4. Data Analysis

The first stage focused on computing the descriptive statistics to reflect demographic and response distribution ratios. The data normality was confirmed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. Secondly, the focus went on exploring correlations between engagement, satisfaction, and loyalty by computing Pearson correlation coefficients. In a final stage, several proposed correlations were tested using multiple linear regressions:

1. Fan engagement $\rightarrow$ Fan satisfaction;
2. Fan satisfaction $\rightarrow$ Fan loyalty;
3. Fan engagement $\rightarrow$ Fan loyalty (indirect effect).

Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$, with $p < 0.001$ indicating high significance. Regression coefficients (β) and explained variance (R^2) were interpreted following Hair et al. [17]. Before conducting the regression analyses, the main statistical assumptions were verified. No multicollinearity issues were detected, as Variance Inflation Factors (VIFs) ranged between 1.12 and 1.48, below the critical threshold of 5. Residual plots indicated homoscedasticity, with no visible funnel patterns, and standardized residuals were normally distributed (skewness = -0.31 ; kurtosis = 0.42). Additionally, Cook's Distance values were below 1.0, confirming the absence of influential outliers. These diagnostic checks ensured the robustness and validity of the regression results.

2.5. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual model proposes that fan engagement exerts a positive influence on fan satisfaction, which subsequently enhances fan loyalty. Satisfaction is expected to mediate the relationship between engagement and loyalty, reflecting the psychological process through which emotional involvement evolves into long-term attachment.

This framework integrates both affective and behavioral dimensions of engagement and aligns with recent empirical studies emphasizing satisfaction as a key mediator in fan relationship models [1,2,9].

The proposed relationships are illustrated in Figure 1.

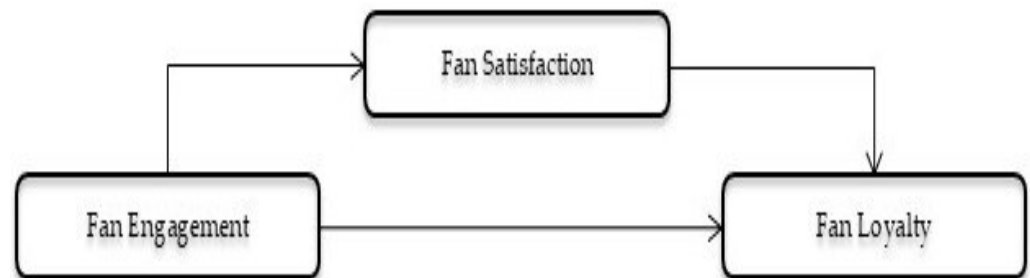


Figure 1. Conceptual framework illustrating the hypothesized relationships among fan engagement, satisfaction, and loyalty.

Satisfaction mediates the relationship between engagement and loyalty in football.

3. Results

3.1. Sample Characteristics

The analysis comprised of 218 valid responses. Gender wise, 71% of respondents were male, aged averagely 29.4 years ($SD=7.8$). Education wise, 58% of the respondents had graduated university studies, 24% were highschool graduates and 18% held post-graduate graduations. Match attendance wise, 22% reported having attended 1-2 home games per season, while 46% of the respondents attended 3 to 5 matches and 32% checked into six or more matches.

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 1. Sample profile (N = 218)

Variable	Category	(%)
Gender	Male	71
	Female	29
Age	Mean = 29.4 years ($SD = 7.8$)	—
Education	High school	24
	University degree	58
	Postgraduate	18
Attendance frequency	1–2 matches/season	22
	3–5 matches/season	46
	6 or more matches/season	32

Note. Values represent valid percentages based on N = 218.

3.2. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation coefficients are detailed in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and correlations

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1. Engagement	4.21	0.56	1.00	—	—
2. Satisfaction	4.09	0.62	0.72***	1.00	—
3. Loyalty	4.14	0.58	0.68***	0.76***	1.00

Note. $N = 218$. All correlations are significant at $p < .001$.

Means are based on five-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

The research shows high values (above 4.0 on a five-point scale) for all three factors under the scope- fan engagement, satisfaction, and loyalty. This can be translated into a generally positive attitude among the audiences. However, a significant positive degree of correlations is shown between engagement and satisfaction ($r = 0.72$, $p < 0.001$) and between satisfaction and loyalty ($r = 0.76$, $p < 0.001$). Engagement was also positively related to loyalty ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.001$).

3.3. Regression Analysis

The research included testing the hypothesized relationships among the variables using linear regression analyses. The results can be viewed in Table 3.

Table 3. Regression and mediation results

Relationship	β	t-value	p-value	Indirect Effect (β)	95% CI (Bootstrap)
Engagement $\rightarrow$ Satisfaction	0.64	14.715	< 0.001	—	—
Satisfaction $\rightarrow$ Loyalty	0.71	12.893	< 0.001	—	—
Engagement $\rightarrow$ Loyalty (direct)	0.32	15.791	< 0.01	—	—
Engagement $\rightarrow$ Loyalty (indirect, via satisfaction)	—	—	< 0.001	0.46	[0.32, 0.59]

Note. Standardized coefficients (β) and t-values are reported. Indirect effects were estimated using hierarchical regression and validated with 5,000 bootstrap samples. The indirect effect of engagement on loyalty via satisfaction was significant, as the confidence interval does not include zero.

According to them, the fan engagement is confirmed to significantly predict satisfaction ($\beta = 0.64$, $p < 0.001$), which further explains 46% of its variance ($R^2 = 0.46$). Furthermore, satisfaction proves to be a significant predictor of fan loyalty ($\beta = 0.71$, $p < 0.001$), accounting for 51% of its variance ($R^2 = 0.51$). When engagement and satisfaction were entered simultaneously in a hierarchical model, the total explained variance of loyalty increased to 57%.

In addition to the regression coefficients, we examined the magnitude of the effects using Cohen's f^2 . The analyses indicate that fan engagement contributes markedly to explaining satisfaction ($f^2 = 0.85$), and that satisfaction plays an even more substantial role in predicting loyalty ($f^2 = 1.04$). When both variables are considered simultaneously in the hierarchical model, the overall influence of engagement on loyalty reaches

a very pronounced level ($f^2 = 1.33$). Taken together, these estimates show that the associations observed in the model are not only statistically reliable but also hold meaningful practical weight.

The indirect effect of fan engagement on loyalty through satisfaction was significant, confirming the mediating role of satisfaction in the proposed model. Specifically, the mediation analysis indicated a standardized indirect effect of $\beta = 0.46$ ($p < 0.001$), as estimated through hierarchical regression following the procedure recommended by Baron and Kenny [18].

A supplementary bootstrap test (5,000 resamples) produced a 95% confidence interval [0.32, 0.59], which did not include zero, confirming the robustness of the mediating relationship.

The mediation structure and its standardized coefficients are illustrated in Figure 2.

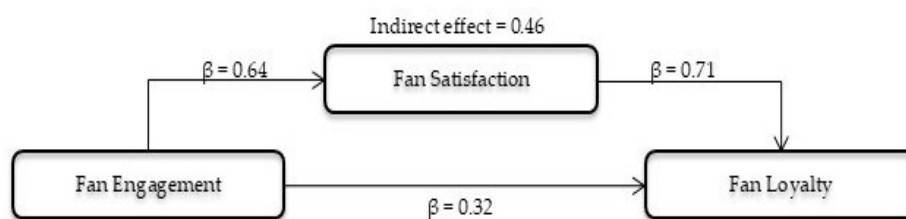


Figure 2. Mediation model with standardized coefficients.

The validity of the regression model was also examined through diagnostic plots.

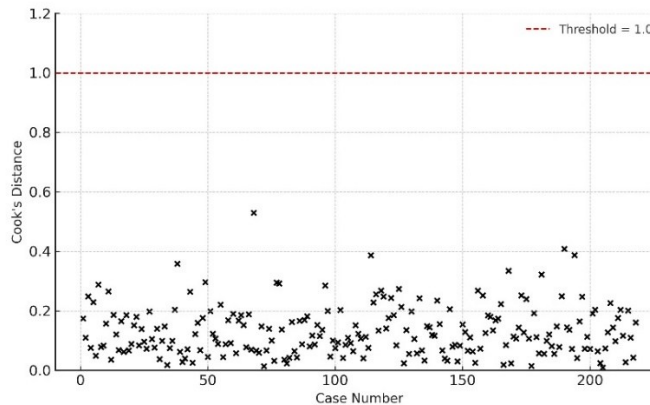


Figure 3. Cook's Distance values for regression model validation (N = 218).

As shown in Figure 3, all Cook's Distance values fell well below the conventional threshold of 1.0, indicating that no influential outliers were present and that the model was statistically robust.

The absence of influential outliers and the consolidated regression estimates are confirmed by the values remaining below the threshold of 1.0 in their entirety.

All effects are significant at $p < .01$; indirect effects were tested using hierarchical regression and confirmed through bootstrap confidence intervals.

3.4. Summary of Findings

The results support all hypothesized relationships.

Fan engagement exerts a strong and positive influence on satisfaction, and satisfaction emerges as a powerful predictor of loyalty. Engagement is nonetheless an indirect contributor to loyalty by means of satisfaction, as it indicates that long term commitment is decisively influenced by positive experiences and emotional involvement.

These findings validate the proposed conceptual model (Figure 1) and confirm that emotional and cognitive attachment to the club translates into behavioral and attitudinal loyalty among football fans.

4. Discussions

The findings confirm the strong relationships among engagement, satisfaction, and loyalty. These patterns are consistent with the logic of established sport management frameworks, such as the Psychological Continuum Model [13], the Sport Service Satisfaction Scale [14], and the conceptual structure proposed by Bee and Havitz [15].

Emotional engagement, along with simple behavioural involvement, turned out to be steady contributors to satisfaction, a pattern already noted in earlier studies [9,19]. Their association suggests that when fans feel both emotionally connected and mentally aligned with the club, the experience itself gains value [1,8,9]. Satisfaction is the point where this involvement starts to take a more durable shape, gradually turning into long-term commitment [5,20]. This tendency also appeared in the consistent behaviour of supporters, even when results were weaker, which matches other findings on retention and trust [1,2,6,19].

Digital communication plays an increasingly visible role in shaping loyalty. Recent studies emphasise that online engagement enhances identification and behavioural intention [7,21], while enabling the formation of communities and extending interaction beyond stadium contexts [22]. As the digital sphere expands, fan relationships tend to become more fluid, mixing informational and emotional dimensions [1,9,22]. Authenticity remains essential: consistent and transparent communication strengthens engagement [23], whereas contradictions between public claims and internal behaviour can erode trust [24,25]. These dynamics connect to broader debates on legitimacy and moral alignment within sport organisations [26,27].

Although digital engagement was not directly measured in this study, it represents an increasingly relevant dimension of contemporary fandom and is therefore discussed here as a contextual factor supported by recent literature.

Cultural and identity factors remain influential, particularly in post-communist European environments where fandom is intertwined with regional heritage [13,28,29]. The analysed club follows this pattern, functioning as a local symbol with civic resonance, in line with recent work on political and cultural dimensions of fandom [30,31].

However, fan loyalty can also be influenced by external factors that were not directly measured in this study, such as fluctuations in team performance, ticket pricing policies, political identity cues within supporter groups, or forms of organized fan activism. These contextual elements represent potential confounding influences that may interact with engagement and satisfaction, and should therefore be considered in future research.

5. Theoretical and Practical Implications

5.1. Theoretical Contribution

Our study offers new insight into the Psychological Continuum Model by showing how engagement, satisfaction, and loyalty evolve inside an active supporter community. Engagement emerges less as a starting point and more as a force that moves fans across psychological stages in a progression that rarely appears strictly linear [13]. Interestingly, this movement becomes clearer when emotional connection mixes with everyday participation, strengthening the Attraction and Attachment stages more than

earlier PCM interpretations suggested [9,14]. The novelty of our approach lies in documenting this process within a lived football context, where engagement displays a fluidity that research has largely assumed but seldom illustrated.

Satisfaction adds a stabilizing element to this progression. Rather than concluding the process, it reshapes emotional involvement into attitudes that endure and quietly guide future commitment [14,32]. When supporters experience fairness, clarity, or authenticity in their interactions with the club, this evaluative moment becomes more influential and nudges engagement toward loyalty in a deeper way [1,32]. What becomes visible here is that these mechanisms persist even in the fluctuating and often pressured landscape of Eastern European football, which offers a valuable context for refining PCM assumptions [3,4].

A final contribution appears in the transition from Attachment to Allegiance, where perceived authenticity and relational quality play a more decisive role than PCM applications typically emphasize. Supporters respond not only to performance but also to how consistently the club aligns its behavior with its stated identity and its responsibilities toward the community [23]. When this alignment holds, movement along the continuum feels steadier; when it slips, the psychological pathway becomes fragile. Interestingly, these subtle relational cues shape progression just as strongly as traditional sport-related stimuli, opening new directions for thinking about continuity within the PCM framework.

5.2. Practical Implications

The findings of this study provide several actionable insights for sport managers aiming to strengthen fan loyalty through strategic engagement initiatives. First, the significant role of emotional engagement suggests that clubs should invest in communication and branding strategies that reinforce identity, history, and shared values. Narratives that highlight legacy, community belonging, and symbolic meaning can enhance emotional resonance and strengthen supporters' psychological alignment with the club.

Second, behavioral engagement should be cultivated through accessible participation opportunities, such as interactive matchday activities, volunteer initiatives, supporter-driven projects, or digital involvement campaigns. Encouraging active participation fosters experiential value and creates relational ties that support long-term commitment.

Third, the mediating effect of satisfaction emphasizes the importance of service quality and fairness in managerial decisions. Clubs should prioritize transparent communication, prompt resolution of supporter concerns, and improvements in matchday logistics, including ticketing, stadium access, and fan services. Enhancing satisfaction not only reinforces engagement but also stabilizes loyalty during periods of fluctuating performance.

Finally, the results underscore the strategic importance of building long-term relationship management programs. Implementing structured feedback mechanisms, personalized communication, and targeted loyalty initiatives can help clubs retain supporters and increase their lifetime value. These measures are particularly relevant in Eastern European contexts, where community identity and emotional attachment play a central role in the supporter-club relationship.

To translate the findings into actionable strategies, sport organizations may consider:

- improving matchday experience through better stadium logistics, ticketing clarity, and fan-oriented in-stadium activities;
- strengthening authenticity in communication by ensuring transparent and consistent messaging across all channels;
- supporting fan rituals and community practices that reinforce identity and emotional attachment;

- aligning digital content with supporter expectations through timely updates, behind-the-scenes material, and interactive formats.

6. Limitations and Future Research

The study presents several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, all measures relied on self-reported perceptions, which may be affected by common-method bias, social desirability tendencies, or subjective memory errors. Although the instrument demonstrated strong internal consistency, self-report data cannot fully capture the complexity of actual supporter behavior.

Second, the cross-sectional design restricts causal inference. The tested relationships reflect associations measured at a single point in time; therefore, longitudinal studies would be necessary to observe how engagement, satisfaction, and loyalty evolve as supporter experiences and club conditions change.

Third, the data were collected from supporters of a single professional football club. While this approach provides contextual depth, it limits the generalizability of the findings to broader football cultures or to clubs operating in different competitive or organizational environments. Future research should compare multiple clubs across regions to better identify contextual variations.

Fourth, the study did not include objective behavioral indicators such as ticket purchase records, attendance data, merchandise consumption, or digital trace measures. Although digital engagement was discussed conceptually in the Discussion section, it was not included as a measured variable in the instrument, which limits the ability to connect online participation with traditional forms of supporter behavior. Integrating behavioral data with perceptual measures would strengthen the predictive validity of the engagement–satisfaction–loyalty model and reduce reliance on self-reported intentions.

Finally, future work could incorporate additional variables that may influence loyalty, such as social identity strength, perceived club authenticity, digital fan experience, or club governance perceptions. Integrating validated digital engagement scales would also allow researchers to examine how online participation interacts with emotional and behavioral engagement in shaping long-term commitment. These extensions would deepen understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying supporter commitment and improve the robustness of engagement-based loyalty models.

7. Conclusions

The hereby research aimed to examine how emotional and behavioral engagement influence satisfaction and loyalty among football fans, and to determine whether satisfaction mediates this relationship within a professional Eastern European club.

The results confirm that engagement acts as a significant driver of loyalty from both psychological and behavioral perspectives, while satisfaction fulfills a pivotal mediating role between the two. These findings align with recent sport management literature, indicating that long-term supporter commitment is shaped by emotional attachment and the quality of the fan experience [1,5].

Although online interactivity and digital communication are frequently associated with strengthened identification and loyalty in contemporary research [6,33], it must be noted that digital engagement was not directly measured in this study; therefore, such observations reflect prior literature rather than empirical evidence from the present dataset.

From a managerial perspective, the results underline the importance of coherent communication, authenticity, and the continuous improvement of service quality.

Clubs that design supporter experiences aligned with fan expectations, cultural identity, and transparent managerial practices are more likely to generate satisfaction and reinforce loyalty [1,9,21].

Within the Eastern European football environment, the analyzed club illustrates how strategically using locally rooted values can strengthen the transformation of emotional engagement into long-term commitment. Future studies should broaden this analytical lens by comparing multiple clubs across regional and international contexts, thereby assessing the generalizability of these mechanisms and refining engagement-based loyalty models. Expanding such research may offer practical benefits for sport organizations seeking to design sustainable and culturally grounded supporter engagement strategies.

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Appendix 1. Questionnaire Items (18 items)

(Likert scale: 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree)

Table A1. Questionnaire items grouped by construct

Construct	Sub-dimension	Item code	Item
Fan Engagement	Affective	FE1	I feel a strong emotional connection with this club.
Fan Engagement	Affective	FE2	Supporting this club is an important part of who I am.
Fan Engagement	Cognitive	FE3	I often find myself thinking about the club, even outside match days.
Fan Engagement	Cognitive	FE4	The club's values and identity strongly resonate with my own beliefs.
Fan Engagement	Behavioral	FE5	I actively follow news, updates, and activities related to the club.
Fan Engagement	Behavioral	FE6	I frequently participate in supporter discussions, events, or online groups related to the club.
Fan Satisfaction	-	FS1	Overall, my experience as a supporter of this club has been a positive one.
Fan Satisfaction	-	FS2	The club generally meets my expectations as a fan.
Fan Satisfaction	-	FS3	I am satisfied with the way the club communicates with supporters.
Fan Satisfaction	-	FS4	The matchday experience usually meets my expectations.
Fan Satisfaction	-	FS5	The club treats supporters fairly and respectfully.
Fan Satisfaction	-	FS6	I am satisfied with the quality of services offered to fans.
Fan Loyalty	-	FL1	I am very likely to continue supporting this club in the future.
Fan Loyalty	-	FL2	I would recommend this club to other people.
Fan Loyalty	-	FL3	I intend to attend matches of this club whenever I have the opportunity.
Fan Loyalty	-	FL4	I feel committed to this club, even when team performance fluctuates.
Fan Loyalty	-	FL5	I am willing to support the club through purchasing tickets or merchandise when possible.
Fan Loyalty	-	FL6	I would remain loyal to this club even during difficult periods.