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Action and reaction: how political influence perceptions interact with football fan loyalty

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The present study analyses the interaction between sport infrastructure development and the role of politics in that development. The analysis focuses on Hungary, where the relationship between politics and sport is prominent in the development of sports infrastructure.

Methodology: To investigate the research question, a unique dataset is used: in 2022, fans of a Hungarian first-division football team responded to a survey on team loyalty, venue preferences, perception of political influence and other topics in the city where this first-division football team is located ($n = 207$).

Findings: Empirical results highlight a significant moderating effect of perceptions on political influence: with lower levels of political influence acceptance, the relationship between perceived stadium quality and football fans' loyalty is weaker.

Practical implications: The present findings have implications for sports management when the ideal role of political influence in the sport and football environment is debated.

Research contribution: Empirical findings contribute to the assessment of the impact of political influence perceptions on football fan loyalty.

Originality: Previous brand management literature did not examine moderation effects related to political influence perceptions extensively, and the research aims to fill this gap.

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Sport; football; politics; Hungary; facility development

However beautiful the strategy, you should occasionally look at the results. (Winston Churchill)

Introduction

Sports facility development programmes are widespread in many parts of the world. Given the significant cost of these investments, the financing structure typically involves various public subsidies. According to several opinions,

the intertwining of politics and sport can be observed in sports infrastructure development (Fort, 1999; Lekakis, 2016), and society, including the fan community, may be polarized by the perceived motivations behind stadium development (Guschwan, 2016; Zec, 2014). Although brand associations about the stadium have been examined in previous sports marketing literature on fan loyalty (Gladden & Funk, 2001; Kunkel et al., 2016; Maderer et al., 2016), brand management

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literature has not yet examined possible moderation effects related to political influence perceptions extensively. Our research aims to fill this gap.

This paper addresses the question whether perceptions about political influence have an effect on the relationship between stadium development processes and fan loyalty. The analysis is performed in the context of a Hungarian first-division football team. Due to the strong role of politics in Hungarian sport, this analysis framework is especially suitable to understand the linkages between politics and fan loyalty. Since the brand equity literature hypothesizes a relationship between brand association and brand loyalty (Aaker, 1992), brand management models, that can take into account psychological-based decisions of individuals and the economic effects simultaneously, are suitable for studying the relationship between brand associations and brand loyalty with team home, home match venue and stadium development as brand associations.

The complexity of loyalty allows for multiple definitions, with the most prevalent distinction being between attitudinal and behavioural loyalty. In our study, we focus primarily on attitudinal loyalty, as the political influence perception is assumed to have a significant impact on it. We investigate the hypothesized relationship for brand loyalty in the case of stadium-related associations, highlighting the moderating effect of perceptions on political influence.

This study examines this question through the lens of fan opinions towards a team with a longstanding tradition in the Hungarian premier league. Survey questions on brand associations about the stadium, brand loyalty and other topics were answered by 207 fans. This dataset provides a unique opportunity to explore our research question, as during the data collection in 2022, fans perceived a substantial influence of politics on the football team and also perceived favourable effects of facility development.

As a result, there were extensive and emotive debates about the ideal role of political influence in the football environment. The uniqueness of this situation provides an opportunity to contribute to an understanding of the effects of political influence in general. In this research, regression modelling is applied. The empirical results highlight a significant moderating effect of perceptions on political influence: with lower levels of political influence acceptance, the relationship between perceived stadium quality and football fans' loyalty is weaker. By focussing on the perception of political influence, these results add significantly to the existing literature on sports brand equity modelling.

The paper is structured as follows. The second section contains a summary of the literature on brand equity and perceptions of political influence. The data and methodology are described in the third section, and the results of the empirical analysis are presented in the fourth section. The findings of the study are summarized in the last section.

Literature review

Politicians often align themselves with the strengths and achievements of sports, utilizing these successes as communication material. This phenomenon is particularly observable in the context of sports infrastructure development, despite the mixed perception that facility development elicits from the fan environment. Despite the widespread presence of this phenomenon, the body of relevant research is limited, and our study aims to fill this gap.

For football events, an important component of service quality is the stadium, the perception of the home ground, which is considered the home of the fans. Charleston (2009) argued that favourite stadiums may embody the same meaning as that associated with the concept of home, and the three important elements of connection are the overall quality of the facility, attachment to the

geographical location and the importance of peer interactions. The stadium can also be seen as an essential brand association (e.g. Gladden & Funk, 2002), as the team's identity, brand elements and local presence are reflected in the appearance of the facility.

In the field of sports, branding has a major role, and its relationship with politics raises a number of questions. The theoretical background to brand building and brand equity is described in detail in the marketing literature (Aaker, 1992; Atilgan et al, 2005; Keller, 1993; Leone et al., 2006; Papadopoulos et al., 2011). Brand equity can be defined in a number of ways, and the elements in the definition can include favourable impressions, attitudes and behavioural dispositions (Rangaswamy et al., 1993); the added value provided by the brand name (Farquhar, 1989; Kamakura & Russell, 1993), utility (Kamakura & Russell, 1993) and loyalty and image (Shocker & Weitz, 1988).

Moorman et al. (1992) highlighted the important role of trust in the brand, defined as consumer willingness to rely on a firm as a partner in whom the consumer has confidence. Morgan and Hunt (1994) argued that trust exists only when one party trusts the reliability and integrity of the other party. It is an interesting question whether perceptions about political influence may interact with fan sentiments and brand building. This study examines this question.

Brand building and brand equity are essential components of sports business, and Biscaia et al. (2013) argued that brand equity is vital for professional sports teams, and according to Jaber et al. (2014), brand equity plays an important role in the brand development of football teams and sports clubs. In a sports context, Gladden et al. (1998) described brand equity as the value that fans attribute to their own team name and the symbol of their favourite team. Boyle and Magnusson (2007) pointed out that brand equity of sports teams is one of the most important and uncertain aspects of managing the business side of

sports teams. Blumrod and Huang-Horowitz (2017) also highlighted the vital importance of branding in creating long-term benefits for professional sports teams. Salary et al. (2023) highlighted the importance of service quality dimensions in the brand equity of football clubs. Previous research has concluded that developing the brand equity of a product can have benefits in a number of areas, most notably future profitability (Srivastava & Shocker, 1991). Gil et al. (2008) argued that one important benefit of brand equity is to reduce corporate costs and increase profits. According to Kunkel et al. (2013), sports brand management is an environmental determinant that can influence consumers' psychological relationship with a sport, league or team.

Aaker (1992) argued that one of the keys to successful branding is the development of brand identity – it is important to know what the brand stands for so that this identity can be expressed effectively. The role of brand identity in strengthening loyalty is also highlighted by Kiran et al. (2024); according to their findings, brand activism, including political influence, may contribute to enhancing brand loyalty through creating emotional bonds with consumers. In this study it is assumed that political influence perceptions can also influence brand identity; therefore, an effect on brand loyalty is also possible.

Brand loyalty and attachment are strongly related concepts in the sports business. In the case of sports brands, the psychological type of attachment of fans plays a significant role, which contributes to their involvement in the functioning of the sports team in many areas. In a number of studies (Celsi & Olson, 1988; Zaichkowsky, 1985), felt involvement has generally been interpreted as representing the psychological relationship between the individual and the object. Previous literature has dealt extensively with the issue of team attachment. The literature on attachment (Bowlby, 1982) suggests that psychological connections can occur between individuals and certain objects.

In the field of marketing, attachment can play a key role in understanding the relationship with a brand. However, given the emotional impact of sports, identifying the components of attachment is not a simple task. Psychological relationships with objects within a sports context include the coach, the player, the team, the league, the sport itself, or, for example, the sports brand and the stadium (Rose et al., 2021). According to James et al. (2002), fans form a psychological bond with a sports team; a loyal fan is characterized by a strong psychological attachment regardless of the performance of the favourite team. Newson et al. (2023) even highlighted that team losses can lead to extreme fan bonding through shared dysphoria explaining identity fusion. Wang and Zhang (2011) also argued that loyal fans support their team through their market demand, thus generating revenue through the purchase of merchandise and attendance at matches. As defined by Harris and Ogbonna (2008), a strong psychological attachment and sense of identification with the team among fans can be considered a prerequisite for loyalty.

Attitudinal loyalty and identification are also slightly distinct concepts, loyalty being related to an internal psychological connection with a team including willingness to maintain the commitment to the team (Yun et al., 2021), and identification capturing the psychological connection between fans and the team (Wann & Pierce, 2003), and in the paper their common features are focussed on. Therefore, attitudinal loyalty, when examining the effects of stadium associations and political influence perception, is considered to be similar to team identification.

Fan attachment can result in brand identification, which is particularly evident in the world of sport, where fans perceive the team, the traditional community, the home facility and other brand characteristics as a combination of elements that are unique and distinct from other, competitor teams. Özgen and

Argan (2017) argued that identification is a psychological relationship that fans develop with their team. According to Wann and Pierce (2003), team identification can be interpreted as the psychological and behavioural commitment of fans that develops an attachment to the experience, which can result in loyalty. Heere and Dickson (2008) noted that the separation of commitment and loyalty is a relevant issue in marketing research. They conclude that commitment can be understood primarily as a cross-sectional concept that is a characteristic of individuals. In contrast, loyalty, in their view, is longitudinal in nature and can be placed on a time scale.

Jones (1997) mentioned that while a sports consumer who merely watches the sport will quickly forget the event that was witnessed, a person who can develop an affinity for the team will continue to be interested in it until the intensity of feelings for the team becomes so strong that it becomes part of personality and the person is able to devote the daily life to the team or its community. Such a sports consumer can be called a fan. Identity fusion may have several effects, and lifelong loyalty can be based on self-shaping group events (Newson et al., 2016).

Fan community can also have an important role in developing brand loyalty. Yoshida et al. (2015) highlighted the importance of interaction, as they found that one of the significant determinants of fan loyalty is the attachment to the fan community. The geographic location for the development of a sense of community and loyalty is the team's match, and the stadium, which is transformed into a community space with branded features, is considered the team's home. The physical presence of the stadium creates the possibility of loyalty, the possibility of experiencing community feelings together, the expression of social belonging, the reception of brand features and the collective expression of collective feelings. In the case of football fans, stadiums have an important role in developing team identification; when

examining components of team identification, Delia and James (2018) distinguished three important elements of team meaning, one of which is the location of the sporting event (alongside the team's past and present).

The concept of loyalty is linked to identification with a sports team. The importance of this is demonstrated by the results of Trail et al. (2003), who found that the affective state of the fan has a direct impact on consumption behaviour. Several studies have examined the relationship between team identification and attitudinal loyalty (Karjalaoto et al., 2016; Stevens & Rosenberger, 2012). The literature has found that team identification affects a number of constructs, including observable effects on the relationship with match outcomes (Wann & Dolan, 1994), team cognition and traditions (Wann & Branscombe, 1995) and affect (Branscombe & Wann, 1992; Wann & Pierce, 2003). According to Wann and Pierce (2003), overall identification is a psychological relationship between the fan and the team, measured by the extent to which the fan views the team as a self-extension. According to Gwinner and Swanson (2003), fans who are strongly attached to a team can be extremely loyal, viewing a particular team as a central element of their identity, where they interpret the team's success and failure as personal success and failure.

According to Urde et al. (2007), identification is a deep affection that includes the history and traditions of the club, which form part of the brand heritage. Soderberg et al. (2019) highlighted that the emotional connection may enhance the loyalty effect since fan perceptions of their political environment can deepen their commitment to their teams.

Dimmock et al. (2005), by arguing that team identification is voluntary psychological group membership, suggested that the cognitive and affective dimensions of a team are likely to be strongly interrelated. According to Heere and James (2007), a primary factor in team identification is the symbolic power that

sports teams may represent as an expression of social identity, such as representing a city, state or nationality. This symbolic power may be attractive to politicians since political interest can also include seeking for the sympathy of the fan community.

Cohen et al. (2017) argued that individuals identify with an organization (or team) if it represents values that they themselves hold according to their own self-awareness. Identification is created in fans with the team's image, tradition and principles and is also manifested in the way individuals embrace the community rules. In this sense, it is not only the identification of the fan with the team and its values but also the identification of the team members, players, coaches and management with the club's values, which often derive from the community's values, which becomes important to the fans. Woratschek et al. (2020) have shown that team identification directly and indirectly promotes loyalty by improving fans' perceptions of team performance and stadium atmosphere.

As the previous literature clearly indicates, stadium associations are among the most important influencing factors, which may impact loyalty. The definition of loyalty in marketing can have several aspects. In sports marketing, fan loyalty can be a fundamental manifestation of behaviour and attitude, and accordingly, these two approaches have been prevalent in the literature with respect to the measurement of loyalty to sports teams. In our study, although behavioural loyalty may also be a major influencing factor from a marketing perspective, we focus on attitudinal loyalty because stadium-related emotions are assumed to have a greater impact in this respect. The study of attitudinal loyalty is highly important in the sports marketing literature (Biscaia et al., 2013; Doyle et al., 2013; Filo et al., 2008; Funk & Pastore, 2000; Gladden & Funk, 2002; Heere & Dickson, 2008; Kaynak et al., 2007; Kunkel et al., 2016; Mahony et al., 2000; Wang & Zhang, 2011).

The relationship between brand associations and loyalty can be influenced by a number of factors. One of these could be the perception of political influence, as it is known to be present in the daily life of individuals and thus can have a strong impact on human emotions. Sport is an area where individuals have the opportunity to express their affiliation, their own feelings and their own thinking and become part of a brand environment. Through its presence, politics can impose itself on the functioning of sports, intentionally trying to expropriate the potential of sports, such as success, the popularity of athletes, the power of the fan base or the economic opportunities that exist in the sports environment (Gerrard, 2022; Lee, 2019). The brand community, on the other hand, is also capable of conveying political messages to the individual and then to the fan group.

In Hungary, this situation is particularly observable. To fully understand the model setting in our paper, it is important to look at the political scene in Hungary. For more than a decade, the governing party has been empowered by a parliamentary supermajority. There have been a number of critical opinions about the state of governance and the country in Hungary (Antal, 2019; Fabry, 2019; Hettyey, 2021; Kováts, 2020; Lamour & Varga, 2020; Neulinger et al., 2023; Pogátsa, 2021; Szikra, 2014). The main message of the domestic governmental communication is that the EU, its leaders and its functioning are evaluated in a negative context.

Visnovitz and Jenne (2021) examined the elements of the populist ideology rhetoric by the Hungarian prime minister's government, arguing that in less than a decade, Hungary has abandoned its role as a reliable EU and NATO partner in its foreign and domestic policy and has sought a personalized government apparatus that builds a new partnership with the once distanced Russia, China. Partnerships are also developed with USA after 2024 presidential elections and the presidential inauguration of President Trump.

The communication against EU member states also means that the external perception of Hungary's prime minister, who is elected leader of the country, is also in a very negative range within the EU. Kenes (2021) also highlights that some argue that Hungary's prime minister as an "irredentist", "right-wing populist" and "authoritarian dictator". Bugaric and Kuhelj (2018) highlighted the populist characteristics of Orbán's political functioning and drew attention to the risk that the rule of law and the principles of democracy are no longer supported by the government. The centralized structured governing party needs domestic support to legitimize its political presence, which it builds partly through populist messages, the political division of the country, the media controlled by the government and the shaping of power functions according to interest, since it is in the political interest to meet the needs of communities capable of demonstrating power and thus to integrate them into the political ideological community.

Due to the communication content that can be placed on sports and the political potential that lies hidden in the fan community, Hungarian politicians seek to control and influence the feelings of fans through sports organizations (for example, as the leaders of sports associations are also leading politicians of the governing party). This ambition is understandable, as Sapotichne (2012) found that rhetorical strategy is generally considered important in relation to facility development.

The party that has been in government for more than a decade with a two-thirds majority in parliament emphasized its support for the organization of international sporting events, the appropriation of national symbols, the placement of political leaders at the head of sporting federations, the pro-sport presence of state enterprises, the invariably observed state attachment to some form of Hungarian first division football teams, the support of state media for sport and the parallel alienation of sport from the opposition community.

Stadiums are the most visible element in the world of sport and are an environmental and physical part of the marketing mix. In many cases, the development of facilities is a task for the state or local authorities, and it establishes a link between the political party and the fan community. Securing land and central budget resources, administrative procedures, reducing the tax burden, relationship capital, government influence and local licencing are many of the areas where politics becomes a part of the project delivery. Starting in 2009, the Hungarian state launched a comprehensive facilities development programme under the current legislation, declaring the National Stadium Development Programme a matter of national economic priority.

The social discourse and the media environment also generate a constant negative attention around stadium development programme and other areas, but stadiums need fans. Politicians have identified the general and potential increase in attendance at football events as an important motivation for expensive investment in sports infrastructure, which they expect to strengthen and prove their own political interests. In the sports environment, fan brand communities exist, a narrow identity focus can be circumscribed and communication with fans can be planned. The importance of these considerations is demonstrated by the findings of Underwood et al. (2001) that sports marketing should activate or enact sports consumer identity; therefore, a conclusion can be that fans may well be addressed through identification with their team. Given the likelihood of achieving significant social impact through fan communities, club owners with political affiliations, supported by the presence of city leaders selected from their own political and entrepreneurial community, have built stadiums with government funding to expand the political community built on the articulated political ideology, based on which populist political messages become even more justifiable.

In this way, political interest can then be linked to spectacular development, to the brand community of fans and to the wider local electorate, thus gaining an influential role in politics.

The complexity of fan opinions is illustrated by the conclusions of Coates and Humphreys (2006), who argue that the acceptability of public subsidies may depend to a large extent on the physical location of the facility and the distance from where fans live. Similar issues are also explored in previous marketing literature. Underwood et al. (2001) examined identification with a sports team as a function of the facilities, finding that the utilization of the team's physical facility and the greater social identification of fans depends on the extent to which the facility is integrated into the brand identity of the organization and the extent to which the attributes of the facility enable the development of group identity.

Considering political influences, facility development is not only a branding tool but can be essentially a symbol of power, all with a highly overpriced implementation (Cunha & Bugarin, 2015). As a consequence, it is not surprising that the perception of facility development is not uniform. The domestic fan divide is so spectacular that while there are sold-out fan experiences for the national team, league football matches bring closed sectors and low average attendance (Balogh & Bácsné Bába, 2024). Despite the developments initiated with governmental intentions and the political expectation expressed beforehand, fan opinions include a positive perception of the role of government, as well as differing individual opinions on the optimal level of influence, and the fans' idea of the need for separability around the sport of politics.

The research topic has been explored in parallel using qualitative methodology, and a preliminary interpretation of the results outlines the role of perceptions of political influence. Questions on fan behaviour were explored through in-depth interviews to investigate the

influence of politics. The results overwhelmingly suggested that fan perceptions of political influence and involvement in sports or club life are repulsive and disliked in fan thinking. These findings foreshadowed the importance of using quantitative methodology to measure influence.

The present study examines the question of whether the underlying hypothesis of the relationship between perceptions of sports venue and football fan loyalty is shaped by perceptions and acceptance of political influence, and how the political background and attachment to stadium construction moderates the relationship between stadium associations and fan attitudinal loyalty. These considerations justify the analysis of the perception of political influence in the brand equity model. In our study, the relationship between stadium brand association and fan attitudinal loyalty is assumed to moderate the perception of political influence. Taking this into account, we formulate the following hypotheses.

H1: Stadium perception and associations with stadium positively affect attitudinal fan loyalty.

H2: Perceptions of political influence have a moderating effect on the relationship between stadium-related associations and attitudinal loyalty.

Data and methodology

Research context

The greatest glories of Hungarian football in history can be linked to a number of significant events and achievements, such as World Cup silver medals (1938, 1954), three Olympic gold medals (1952, 1964, 1968), a silver medal (1972), a bronze medal (1960) and a European Championship bronze medal (1964), followed by a period of fluctuating success. The research focuses on the context of the Hungarian national championship, which included international successes such as the Inter-Cities Fairs Cup win by Ferencváros (1965) and the

UEFA Cup final appearance (1984–1985) by Videoton (fan opinions about this football team are examined in this paper), and also some opportunities for a Hungarian team to play in the Champions League.

Since 2010, Hungarian football has undergone a major organizational and infrastructural overhaul to revitalize the popularity and success of the sport, with significant political support, and the central budget has provided football with an abundance of resources for a long time, while the structure of Hungarian sports support is difficult to understand. This abundance of resources has helped the sporting environment, with visible successes in the development of the Hungarian national team. However, Hungarian football still faces challenges, including a decrease in spectator attendance at domestic league matches and increasing political interference in the sport. It is in this context that the research shows the effects of the perception of political influence.

Data

The source of the data is an online survey about opinions from fans belonging to one of Hungary's top football teams. Participation in the online survey was voluntary and anonymous. The selection of the football team is closely related to the research question in the paper, as during the data collection period, fans expressed strong opinions about facility development and perceptions of political influence. The data collection was performed in October 2022, and fans were given 3 weeks to complete the questionnaire, 448 people started and 252 completed it. Of these, we were able to use data from a total of 207 respondents, who provided fully evaluable responses to each question, 84.5% of the respondents were male, 37.7% of them had a college or bachelor's degree, 27.5% had a university or master's degree and 2.9% had a PhD. For income status, we asked for the perceived level of it on a scale from 1 to 10, with the most

common value being 4 (31.9%). The majority of respondents belong to the age category of 35–44 years old (25.6%) and the age category of 45–54 years old (30.4%). Family status could also be indicated by the respondents, and the categories of “Married and living together” (49.3%) and “Single/Unmarried” (24.2%) were the most frequent. Most respondents (44%) do not have a child in their household; 16.9% indicated that the number of children in their household is one, while 25.6% of the respondents live with two children in their household.

Methodology

In the present paper, we focus on indicators closely related to the research questions. Some of the scales used in the questionnaire are based on previous findings in the literature. The design of the questions related to attitudinal loyalty is based on several previous research findings (Biscaia et al., 2013; Doyle et al., 2013; Filo et al., 2008; Funk & Pastore, 2000; Gladden & Funk, 2002; Heere & Dickson, 2008; Kaynak et al., 2007; Kunkel et al., 2016; Mahony et al., 2000; Wang & Zhang, 2011). To measure stadium-related associations, previous literature has also been considered (e.g. Gladden & Funk, 2001).

Indicators related to the measurement of political influence perceptions, that is hypothesized to moderate the relationship between stadium-related brand associations and attitudinal loyalty, were formulated based on the results of a previous parallel qualitative study (performed by the author of this paper), which, based on interviews with fans, clearly indicated that the presence of politics polarizes fan opinions about the club.

Since associations about political influence perceptions have not yet been extensively studied in the sport brand management literature, the identification of the items belonging to the construct representing political influence perceptions also aims to add to previous literature.

When calculating the results, the list of control variables includes a possible measure of team commitment, which was also developed based on previous literature related to behavioural loyalty (Gladden & Funk, 2001). The survey questions could be answered on a scale from 1 to 7; the results for the scales mentioned in this study are presented in Table 1 (MOL Fehérvár FC is the name of the football team). The constructs described in Table 1 are applied to model the relationship between stadium association and football fan loyalty so that the moderation effect of political influence perception is also considered.

To examine the possible common method bias problem (Podsakoff et al., 2003), Harman’s single factor test was performed for the variables in the analysis (including a variable that was first considered as a possible item in the political influence perception construct, although based on some indicator values it was not included in the final version of the political influence perception construct). The exploratory factor analysis results indicate that the first factor accounts for approximately 48.1% of the total variance, therefore, it may be concluded that common method bias is not problematic in the analysis.

Empirical results

Based on the constructs presented in the previous section, linear regression modelling is applied to explore whether there is a moderating effect of political influence perceptions on the relationship between brand association about the stadium and attitudinal loyalty. The related results are reported in Table 2.

As seen in Table 2, the moderation effect of political influence perception was found to be statistically significant ($p = 0.031$, $R^2 = 0.220$) in a linear regression model with attitudinal loyalty as a dependent variable, stadium association, political influence perception and the interaction of the variables as explanatory variables. In order to highlight the effect on the

Table 1. Summary of principal component analysis results.

	Loyalty	Stadium association	Political influence perception	Commitment	TVE	Cronbach alpha
<i>LOYALTY</i>					0.82581	0.957
I consider myself a dedicated fan of MOL Fehérvár FC.	0.898					
If MOL Fehérvár FC performed weaker, I would still be a fan.	0.964					
I would be a fan of MOL Fehérvár FC even if my family or friends did not like MOL Fehérvár FC.	0.951					
It would be difficult to change my opinion about MOL Fehérvár.	0.766					
I will remain a fan of MOL Fehérvár FC even if another team beats it or is better than it.	0.938					
I am willing to defend MOL Fehérvár FC both verbally and in writing during a conversation, even if this leads to a confrontation with someone.	0.921					
<i>STADIUM ASSOCIATION</i>					0.90946	0.900
I am satisfied with Mol Aréna Sóstó.		0.954				
I find the MOL Aréna Sóstó very beautiful.		0.954				
<i>POLITICAL INFLUENCE PERCEPTION</i>					0.80844	0.761
I accept that politics is related to sport and MOL Fehérvár FC.			0.899			
Despite the possible ineffectiveness, I would reduce the presence of politics around the club.			−0.899			
<i>COMMITMENT</i>					0.90934	0.887
I often buy products related to MOL Fehérvár FC (shirts, caps and other souvenirs).				0.954		
I wear/wear/use products with the colours and logo of MOL Fehérvár FC.				0.954		

Data source: own calculation.

relationship between stadium association and attitudinal loyalty, the following two categories of political influence perceptions are distinguished: one of the categories includes respondents who are less accepting of political influence than average (in which case the indicator related to perceptions of political influence is below average), while the other category includes the rest of the respondents. The

relationship between stadium association and attitudinal loyalty is analysed using linear regression, and the results are presented in Table 3. For Table 3, the results of simpler models (without control variables) and extended models (with control variables) are compared. The control variables included in the models are the binary variable for female respondents and the variable for team commitment, as these are assumed to have a significant impact on the degree of attitudinal loyalty.

Table 3 shows that stadium association has a positive effect on attitudinal loyalty. This effect is found to be statistically significant (at the 5 per cent significance level) for both categories of political influence, regardless of whether or not there are control variables in the linear regression model. Based on these results, hypothesis H1 is accepted.

Table 2. Exploration of moderation effect.

Constant	−0.031 (0.626)
Stadium association	0.470 (<0.001)
Political influence perception	0.031 (0.635)
Stadium association * Political influence perception	0.142 (0.031)
R^2	0.220

Data source: own calculation.

Table 3. Linear regression results.

	Simple model		Extended model	
	Political influence perception low	Political influence perception high	Political influence perception low	Political influence perception high
Constant	−0.073 (0.436)	0.040 (0.633)	0.180* (0.042)	0.125 (0.105)
Stadium association	0.351* (<0.001)	0.587* (<0.001)	0.197* (0.011)	0.302* (<0.001)
Female			−1.047* (<0.001)	−0.925* (<0.001)
Commitment			0.441* (<0.001)	0.373* (<0.001)
R ²	0.140	0.279	0.408	0.542

Data source: own calculation.

Note: The asterisks * denote statistical significance at the 5% level. The value in the parentheses indicates the *p*-value.

The results in Table 3 also show that the estimated linear regression coefficient differs significantly for different levels of political influence acceptance: in the group with lower acceptance of political influence, association about the stadium has a smaller effect on attitudinal loyalty. This relationship is observed in linear regression models both without and with control variables. Based on these results, hypothesis H2 is accepted.

Discussion and conclusion

Politics has several widespread effects, and the world of sports is no exception. This field offers numerous interesting research topics since these are related to both the rigidness of politics and the emotionfulness of sport. Previous marketing literature has already studied similar topics when examining brand management in sports. Earlier research on brand equity models is quite extensive, and there has also been a large body of research on the association and loyalty to sports brands (Biscaia et al., 2013; Doyle et al., 2013; Filo et al., 2008; Funk & Pastore, 2000; Gladden & Funk, 2002; Heere & Dickson, 2008; Kaynak et al., 2007; Kunkel et al., 2016; Mahony et al., 2000; Wang & Zhang, 2011). However, politics, which can also have a significant impact on associations and loyalty to a sports brand, is relatively rarely included in brand equity models. Our study aims to fill this research gap.

Attracting spectators to sports events is a key element in sports management. Motivation for attending matches can be the result of rational or rather emotional factors. The quality of the facility may be among the rational influencing factors (Chen et al., 2013; Clemes et al., 2011), while team identification can also result in behavioural fan loyalty (Özgen & Argan, 2017). Similarly, attitudinal loyalty can also be influenced by several factors. In this paper, the possible role of the stadium as an influencing factor of attitudinal loyalty is examined, while also focussing on the moderating effect of political influence perceptions in this relationship.

The research setting is especially suitable to examine the topic: the link between facility development and politics is well known in the Hungarian football fan community. The empirical data for this research comes from a survey with responses from fans of a Hungarian first-league football team where political influence, both in relation to the team and the stadium, was prominent at the time of data collection. This large database of fan responses provided an excellent basis for our research topic. Regarding the popularity of stadium development in the world of sports in general worldwide, our results may contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between facility development and perceptions of political influence. However, due to the uniqueness of the Hungarian football and political

context, the presented conclusions may not necessarily apply universally in an international context.

Based on the results, our research hypotheses were found to be acceptable. Empirical findings highlight a significant moderating effect of political influence perceptions, indicating that the relationship between perceived stadium quality and football fans' loyalty may be weaker with lower levels of political influence acceptance. The findings indicate that although there are several stadium-related factors that can influence fan behaviour and loyalty, for example, stadium parking and cleanliness, perceived crowding and food service (Wakefield & Sloan, 1995), political influence perceptions may also be important in influencing the link between stadium associations and fan loyalty. Since data collection was performed in a unique political environment in a city where politicians belonging to the governing party usually have won local elections with a large majority since years, it emphasizes the significance of the results related to political influence perceptions.

In some respects, the results may be considered surprising, as an important element of the communication related to facility development was that facility development could result in increased fan loyalty and increased motivation to attend matches. However, contrary to the political preconception, the expected increase in game attendance was not achieved, presumably because fans attached associated thoughts to what was happening with the stadium. In this context, it is important to note that the stadium's name has also changed, which may have also contributed to the presented results. Fan disappointment about this and other problems may also have an effect on the presented findings, since, as Hardyns et al. (2022) highlighted, when facing integrity problem perceptions, loyal fans may express and feel a significant disillusionment with the sport. The presented findings are confirmed by the qualitative

results of the in-depth fan interviews conducted in parallel. The results also suggest that fans may link their feelings about sports to their political views. Due to the emotional effects of the implementation of facility development, it can be assumed that both brand associations and loyalty reflect the effects of facility development.

This study highlights a previously neglected research field that is related to the social contract theory in describing the relationship between fans and the club. Few studies have examined this question previously, when analysing a similar question, Middling et al. (2025) uncover a normative social contract that indicates dissatisfaction with the current governance practices of the examined football clubs. The presented results in this paper may also reflect the effect that the involvement of politics can have on the social contract between the fans and the club.

Our research has several limitations. The scope of our research is limited to one country, and the presented results may of course be different in other types of political structures and sport management models. The political affiliations of fans, while potentially influencing results among various segments of football fans, were also not asked for due to its sensitive nature in a city in which local elections are generally won with a large majority by politicians belonging to the governing party since 2010. A replication of the research in other types of political and sports contexts and a comparison of the results could be among the possible directions for future research.

Politics uses the stadium development programme not necessarily only as a sporting development, but also as a communication tool, with the intention of transforming the sporting environment into a support base. In order to achieve this communication objective, government-led cities have been given a prominent role in the facility development programme because of the local attachment of

fans. Thus, due to political influence, the feelings of fans can be subject to a range of influences (governmental desire to increase popularity, political support for a facility development company, club management appointed by the owner and the actions of the governing city government), some of which are invisible, that can have a significant impact on loyalty to the team at the level of individuals and the fan community. The results of the empirical research are therefore particularly noteworthy. Our findings highlight that the expectations of government at the individual and fan community levels are not uniformly supported. Empirical results can also be interpreted as a sign of division of the opinions on the perception of facility development. Another conclusion may be that politicians should be especially careful when selecting communication tools and resource allocation methods related to sports since fan emotions play a significant role in the evaluation of these interventions, and, as the results indicate, perceptions about political influence can significantly affect the relationship between stadium association and fan loyalty.

Disclosure statement

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