

Women's Voices from the Tribunes: Experiences of Turkish Women Fans

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Abstract

This study examined the representation of women in several sports, focusing on the issue of fans, in which women have extremely little engagement. In this context, the present study aimed to better understand women's fan experiences in football and basketball, two sports with gendered structures. One of the qualitative research methodologies utilized was phenomenological design, and the sample was determined using criteria sampling and snowball sampling procedures, both of which are purposive sampling techniques. Interviews were carried out with 22 women football and basketball fans who fit the requirements. The research used a semi-structured individual interview approach to thoroughly analyze the concept of fanhood, with data obtained between February and March 2023. During the interviews, the participants were given seven questions to get a thorough understanding of their fan experiences. The participants agreed to having their video recorded on Zoom and having it transcribed by the researcher. The interviews took an average of 30 minutes. The data was analyzed using MAXQDA, which was then displayed. At the conclusion of the research, both fan groups see fan as a passion and form emotional relationships by offering moral support to their teams. Both sets of fans cited team failure and management failure as reasons for abandoning their fan. Additionally, it was established that both sets of fans identified family responsibilities as a significant hindrance for women in attending matches. Furthermore, participants expressed that sports matches and the atmosphere in the stands are generally influenced by male dominance.

Key Words: Football, basketball, women fans, gender

1. INTRODUCTION

Sport serves a crucial role in contemporary society. Millions of individuals attend sporting events annually or view them on television or the Internet. New YouGov data reveals that 67% of sports followers globally follow sports regularly through various media platforms (YouGov, 2023). Although most individuals perceive sports as a source of entertainment, sports enthusiasts are considerably more reliant on it. Fans remain informed about the latest developments in the team they hold by subscribing to periodicals, reading newspapers, browsing the teams' websites, and engaging with blogs, all of which provide information about the club they support (Mays, 2012). According to Smith & Stewart (2007), certain behaviors demonstrate fans loyalty: purchasing team merchandise and investing a significant amount of money to travel out of state to observe their teams compete. Murrell & Dietz (1992) discovered that sports devotees exert a direct impact on athletic endeavors by providing both emotional and financial assistance. In recent years, fans have been examined as a place where gender stereotypes are created (Dietz, Bean & Omaitis, 2021). Currently, women can do almost everything that males can; this is an obvious fact. However, it is evident that women's involvement in sports events is lower compared to that of men (Yüksel, 2014). For instance, 45% of men exercise or play sport at least once a week, whereas 37% of women do so (Council of Europe, 2023). According to empirical evidence, men are more likely than women to be interested in and participate in sports as spectators (Murrell & Dietz, 1992, Allison, & Knoester, 2021). Recent research reviewed the relationships between gender, sexual identity, and sports fan identities using data from the National Sport and Society Survey and found that women were less likely than males to identify as enthusiastic sports fans (Allison & Knoester, 2021). The notion of justice in Turkish football is gender-specific and deviates from universal standards, according to Nuhurat (2017) in a survey of women fans conducted by the Beşiktaş Sports Club. Additionally, she emphasized that women possess a delicate physique due to physiological and psychological distinctions, and that their perpetual complaints of blasphemy and cold diminish their favorability. Although fans and audiences are traditionally associated with males, the data indicates that there might be a growing women interest in this form of entertainment (Wann et al., 2001). Volleyball and basketball are predominantly favored by women in Turkey, a preference attributed to their inclination towards sports with a greater emphasis on aesthetics rather than rigorous physical demands (Akkoç & Hanifi, 2022). Conversely, football remains entrenched as a male-dominated sport in Turkish society (Sarıkulak & Koca, 2019). Consequently, it is posited that women fans encounter distinct experiences within the sports (Sarıkulak, 2022). The present study aimed the correlation between gender identity and fan participation in sports, with a specific focus on women's perspectives regarding their experiences of fan in the sports of football and basketball. The following inquiries will be investigated to address this primary aim:

- What are the identities of women basketball and football fans?
- Is there a difference between the experiences of women football and basketball fans?

2. MATERIAL & METHOD

Research Model

A phenomenological approach to investigate the formation of supporting identities and the experiences of women football and basketball fans in relation to their female identities. Qualitative research aims to elucidate societal processes or individual issues by drawing on experiential data (Tracy, 2010). The phenomenological pattern serves as a foundation for conducting in-depth and meticulous examination of the things that we see (Yıldırım & Simsek, 2016).

Study Sample

In this study, the criterion sampling and snowball sampling were used to identify participants. The criteria for the participants were as follows, 1) fans of the teams with the most followers in Turkey, including Beşiktaş, Fenerbahçe, and Galatasaray, as well as fans from different teams, 2) individuals

who have witnessed matches in a stadium at least once in their lives, notwithstanding their regular attendance at home, 3) those who do not identify with any fan group but express team loyalty. Individual interviews were undertaken with a sample of 23 women fans who satisfied the criteria. The women football fans were referred to as FF1, FF2, ..., when the text contained the knowledge that was acquired throughout the discussions, while basketball fans were referred to as BF1, BF2,

Table 1. Distribution of participants' demographic characteristics

| No | Name | Age | Education | License Athlete | Licensed Athlete in the family | Sports | Playing away | Live | Favorite Team | First game experience |
|----|---------|-----|-----------|-----------------|--------------------------------|------------|--------------|------|---------------|-----------------------|
| 1 | Yasemin | 52 | BD | No | No | Football | No | 1-w | FB | Father |
| 2 | Cansu | 20 | BS | No | No | Football | Yes | 1-m | BJK | Friend |
| 3 | Begüm | 20 | BS | No | Yes | Football | No | 1-m | GS | Friend |
| 4 | Hüsne | 19 | BS | Yes | No | Basketball | No | 1-w | FB | Father |
| 5 | Defne | 27 | BD | No | No | Football | No | 1-w | GS | Partner |
| 6 | Büşra | 20 | BS | No | No | Football | Yes | 1-m | BJK | Friend |
| 7 | Çiğdem | 40 | BD | Yes | Yes | Football | Yes | 1-w | BJK | Friend |
| 8 | Ceyda | 42 | MD | Yes | Yes | Basketball | No | 1-w | GS | Friend |
| 9 | Gizem | 28 | BD | No | Yes | Football | No | 1-w | FB | Husband |
| 10 | Pınar | 48 | BD | No | No | Basketball | Yes | 1-w | FB | Husband |
| 11 | Şevval | 19 | HS | No | Yes | Football | No | 1-w | GS | Friend |
| 12 | Gülbin | 65 | BD | No | Yes | Football | Evet | 1-m | GS | Friend |
| 13 | Zeynep | 20 | BS | No | No | Basketball | No | 1-m | GS | Family |
| 14 | Neylan | 46 | MD | Yes | Yes | Basketball | No | 1-m | FB | Friend |
| 15 | Şule | 52 | HS | No | Yes | Basketball | No | 1-w | FB | Friend |
| 16 | Zeynep | 60 | HS | No | No | Football | Yes | 1-m | FB | Sibling |
| 17 | Gamze | 41 | BD | No | No | Football | Yes | 1-w | GS | Husband |
| 18 | Nehir | 38 | MD | Yes | No | Football | No | 1-w | BJK | Partner |
| 19 | Duygu | 35 | BD | No | No | Basketball | No | 1-m | FB | Friend |
| 20 | Tayla | 21 | BD | No | No | Basketball | Yes | 1-w | FB | Friend |
| 21 | Nazan | 60 | HS | No | No | Basketball | Yes | 1-w | FB | Husband |
| 22 | Ceren | 40 | MD | Yes | No | Basketball | Yes | 1-w | FB | Husband |

Note. HS: High school; BS: Bachelor's students; BD: Bachelor's degree; MD: Master's degree; 1-w: ones in a week; 1-m: ones in a month

Data Collection

In this study, data was collected using semi-structured individual interview technique to investigate the phenomenon in depth. The semi-structured research technique enables participants to convey their own ideas (Merriam, 2018). The data were collected between February and March 2023. The date of the interview was set at the request of the participants. The duration of the interviews was approximately between 30 and 35 minutes. The interviews were facilitated through the Zoom platform in response to the prevailing Covid-19 pandemic circumstances, with audio or video recordings documented for each session.

Data Analysis

Initially, the data collected was decrypted by MAXQDA program. Content analysis approach was employed to examine the uploaded data within the program. The purpose of the content analysis is to

reach concepts and relationships that can explain the collected data (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). The data were first decrypted and then coded by re-reading the decryption, and eventually the candidate themes were identified, and the final themes determined. After the field data was decrypted, a thematic analysis was carried out based on the initial research hypotheses. Finally, the analysis was visualized with the MAXQDA program.

3. FINDINGS

Findings on the Experiences of Women Football and Basketball Fans

Views of participants regarding the first question about what it means to be a fan and the code map based on their responses was presented in Figure 1.

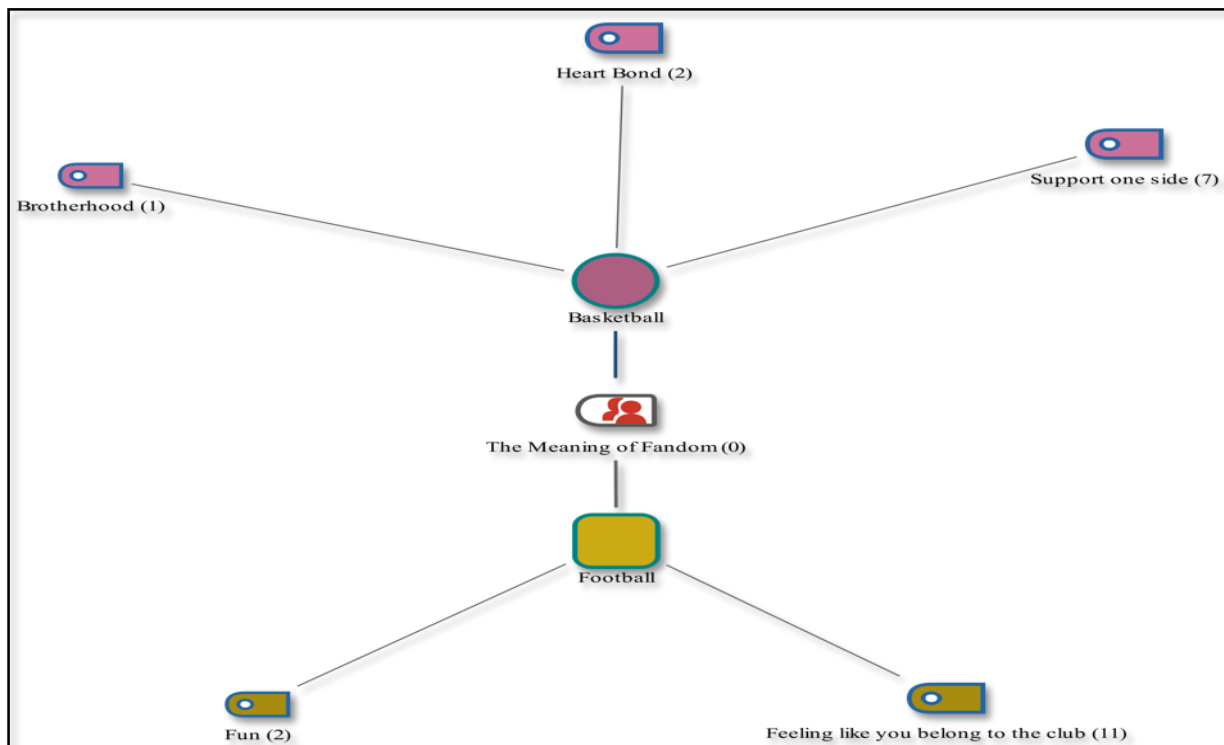


Figure 1. Code Map of Participants' Views on the Meaning of Fan

When the distribution of the participants' views on the meaning of fan is analyzed, it is seen that women basketball fans predominantly perceive fan as supporting a side ($f=7$) and feeling belonging to that team ($f=2$). Women basketball fans stated that they perceive fan as supporting a club at a level that does not lead to fanaticism.

BF2:for me, being a fan is not the same as being a fanatical person. For example, my cousin is a very fanatical person (male) and he gets very angry during games or something like that. While my cousin is a very fanatical person, I just go to a match and cheer for a team because there will be a team that I want to win, and I'll cheer for them.

BF7:.... I'm in the group that thinks be fan isn't fanaticism. I haven't been a fanatic fan my whole life. I see it as supporting the team and giving moral support to the team. I go to the game to give moral support from the team; I don't like hooliganism fans very much. You know what I mean? I go to the game to give moral support.

Unlike basketball women fans, football women fans perceive being a fan as a sense of belonging to the club ($f=11$). According to women football fans, being a fan is perceived as seeing oneself as a part

of the club, feeling a sense of belonging to the club, buying the club's jersey, buying match tickets or season tickets in addition to being a spectator. Excerpts from the opinions of the participants on this subject are as follows:

FF2:...for me, being a fan is a place where you feel a sense of belonging and that you are not alone, being a fan is being an element in a big crowd and something that requires action, it is not enough just to be a spectator, I need to buy your club's jersey, I need to buy match tickets or season tickets or watch a match at the stadium, so it has to be an element that includes how you go and contribute...

FF5:...belonging to a place is like being a fan for some people. I like fans who come to Beşiktaş because it's like a piece of me, a part of my life, like listening to music is a part of my life. For me, Beşiktaş is maybe the meaning of my life.

When the participants' views on the meaning of fan are considered together, the culture of women football fans can generally be characterized as traditional and passionate. Basketball fans can also be passionate, but the atmosphere is generally calmer. Basketball fans, although they support their team, may not be bound by traditional rituals.

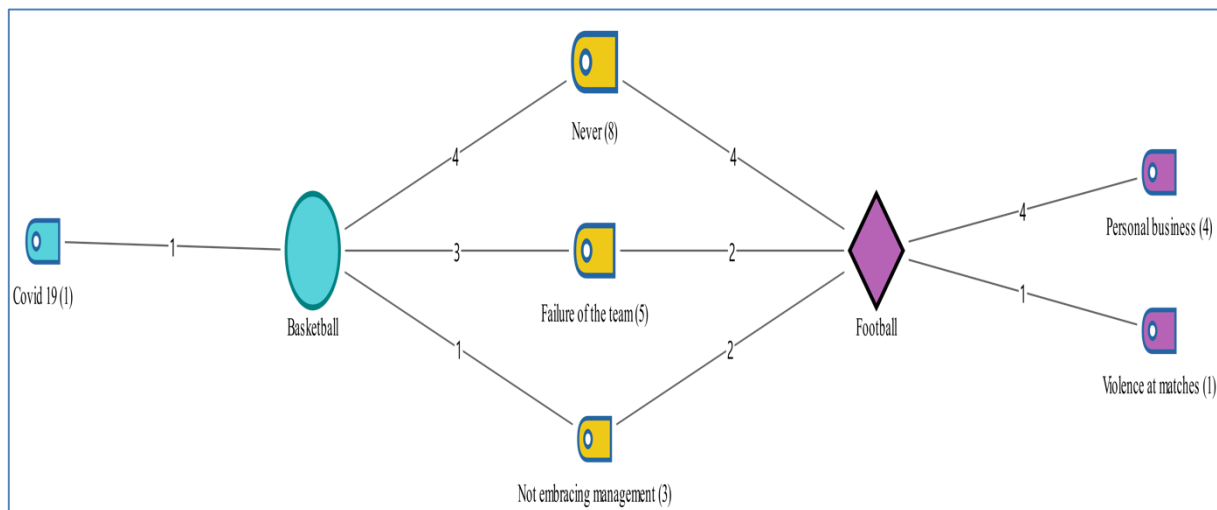


Figure 2. Participants' Opinions on the Reasons for Their Disengagement as Fans

Figure 1 shows participants' responds to the question regarding their distance from being a fan, as well as the code map. According to both fan groups, fans quit supporting their teams when they do badly on the field or disagree with the club's administration. The following participant views demonstrate the situation:

BF2:.. It did happen, especially during periods like these when the team was losing, and I saw that they weren't taking it seriously enough as they used to. They weren't putting in as much effort as they used to, and I thought, "Why waste my brain thinking about this thing? I'm giving up..."

BT6:...I quit the team not because they lose games, but because managers make decisions with which I disagree"

FF3:... It did happen, when the team was awful, but other from that, I'll keep going as long as it's not too horrible...

On the other hand, both groups of fans stated that they had not walked away before, four people stated that they had not walked away before for whatever reason and the participants stated that

being a fan means supporting the team under all circumstances. Excerpts from the views of participants who claimed that they had never moved away from being a fan are as follows:

BF7:... No, never, I go to support my team whether we win or lose...

BF8:... I've never stopped being a fan, and I have no plans to start now. Whether the team plays well or poorly, it's still my team...

FF3:... even when I said I wasn't interested, I realized that I was somehow following it, so I can't say that I never got away, sometimes like this, I don't think it's very healthy and fair in the league, yes, and you know, it shouldn't be followed like this, but I wouldn't want to.

When the opinions of women fans about the reasons for their disengagement from being a fan are evaluated together, it can be said that the team's continuous failure or failure to perform as expected may reduce the interest of some fans or weaken their feelings of fan; in addition, family, work, education or other personal factors and incidents of violence may affect the frequency or degree of a woman's participation in sporting events. Finally, in the context of the first sub-problem, the responses given to the participants regarding their opinions about more women fans attending the matches are shown in Figure 3.

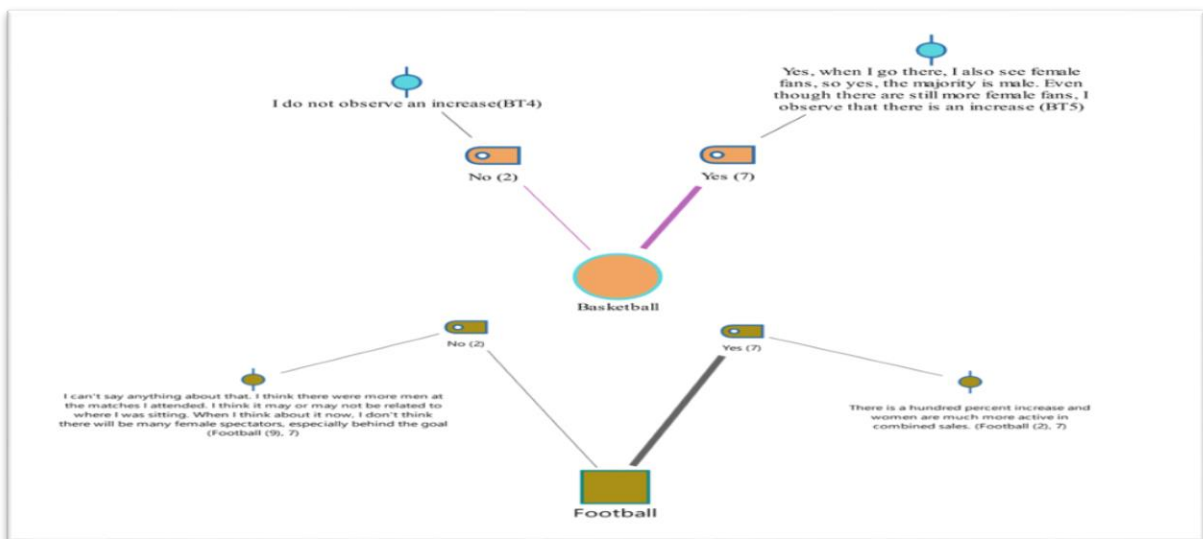


Figure 3. Participants' Opinions on the Increase in the Number of Women Fans

As can be seen in Figure 3, an equal number of participants in both fan groups agree with the statement that the number of women fans has increased. Participant opinions on the reasons for this increase differ according to the fan group. In this direction, the code map of the participants' views on the reasons for the increase in the number of women fans is shown in Figure 4.

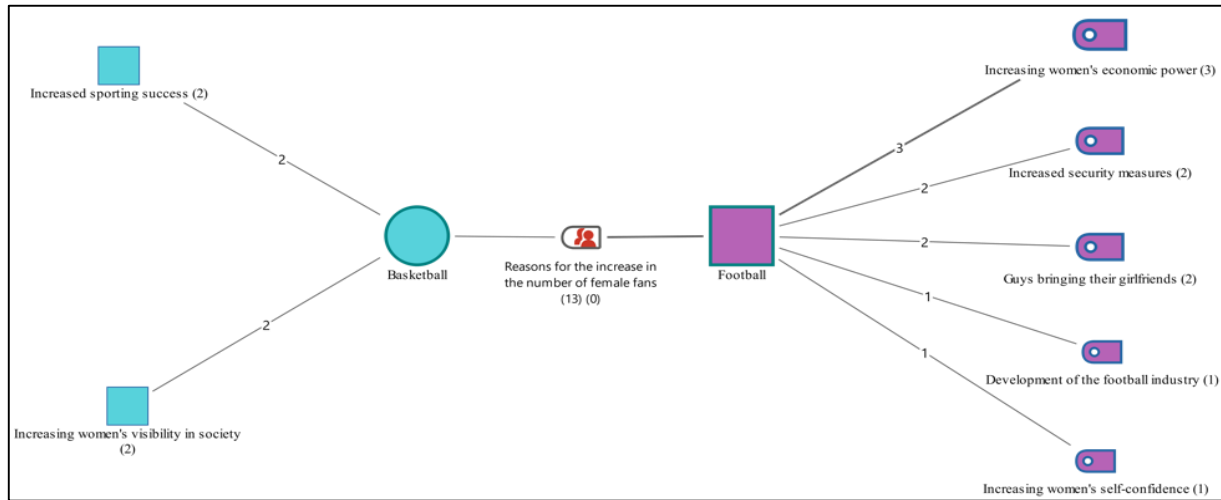


Figure 4. Participants' Views on the Reasons for the Increase in the Number of Women Fans

Figure 4, which shows the views of the participants on the reasons for the increase in the number of women fans, shows that women basketball fans predominantly see the increase in women's economic freedom and the increase in sporting success as the reasons for the increase in the number of women fans. The participant views on this issue are as follows:

BF10:...It is also very important that the place of women in social environments increases and that this effort and awareness increases...

BF3:... The demands for women's visibility are increasing the profitability of demand and I think this is reflected in sports...

On the other hand, women football fans see the increase in women's economic power and the increase in security measures in stadiums as the reasons for the increase in the number of women fans. The participant views on this issue are as follows:

FF4: ... Now a little bit more, in the past the stadiums were more insecure, they were corrupt and there was a lot of swearing, and now there are very high procedures, there are no camera catches, there are no camera catches, there are security measures such as the arrival of this or that sports person, and if it has increased, I think that is why it has increased, because it has become safer and more enjoyable places to watch. Because the stadiums have become safer, women can come more...

FF2:... Women have economic power in working life and this is not something special, but in the past they were more passive and had less economic power, I think Turkish women enjoy watching matches, there is a hundred percent increase in season ticket sales and women are much more active...

FF13:... There is the financial side, the freedom of earning their own money without being dependent on a man...

Women football fans also believe that the fact that men began to accompany their partners to stadiums is a significant cause for the growth in fan fans. FF1: "Also, males are bringing their partners or spouses more often lately, which I really appreciate. In the past, there was no such thing; guys would come alone." FF12: "...for example, a guy brings his lady to the marches".

The Fan Identity of Women Fans in Football and Basketball

Figure 1 depicts the first sub-theme of the second topic, a code map of women fans attending matches.

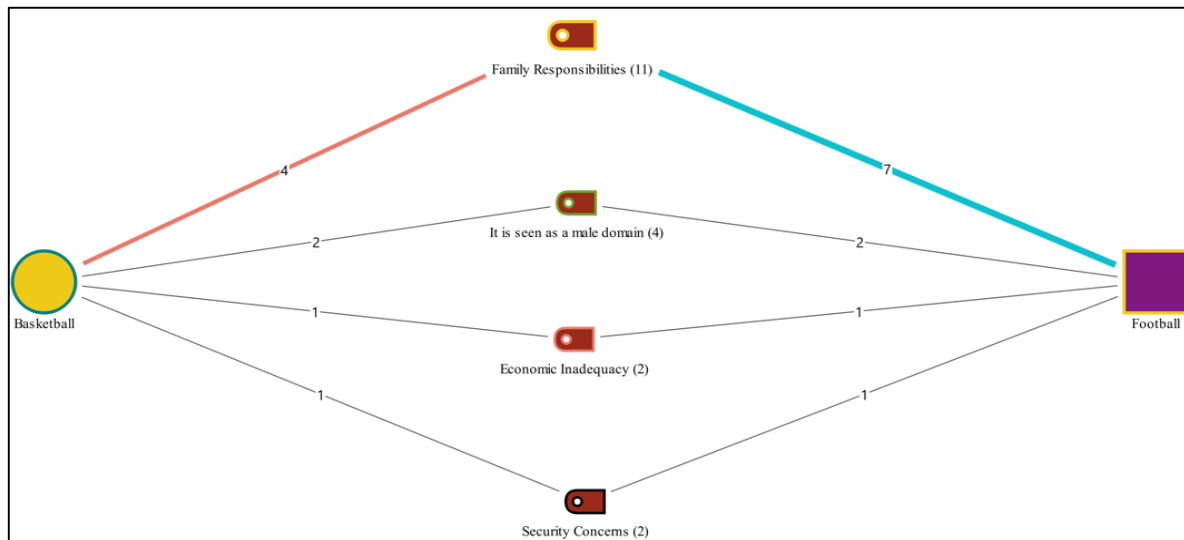


Figure 5. Reasons why it is more difficult for women to go to matches

When the participant's opinions are analyzed, the most frequently expressed opinion by both fan groups is family responsibilities. Although this view was expressed by both fan groups, women football fans were more likely to agree with this view. Especially women with children may avoid participating in such activities to take care of their families. This situation was revealed with the following participant views:

BF3:...Of course, women have to be a mother, they have a family, they have to be a family, these are duties that come from our culture, women...

BF1:... It depends on the circumstances; if there is a kid or whatever, this is an impediment, for example, the priority shifts...

FF2:... Women also have responsibilities at home, so I think that working women have a little more trouble in this area. I think that women are expected to make a lot of sacrifices on the weekends because going to a match means being able to meet the needs of a child who has school tomorrow and the next day.

FF4:... Mothers are usually responsible for the home, children, etc. The mother cannot say that she goes every week to the matches, and she probably cannot.

The second most often expressed view by both fan groups is that sports are seen as a masculine domain. Participants responded that sports contests and the ambiance in the stands are mostly seen as male dominated. Both fan groups stated their viewpoint equally. Participants' views on this subject are as follows:

BF2:... In fact, it is quite simple to attend; however, I believe women wouldn't do so because men consider sports as a significantly higher priority...

FF3:... I don't think women are very interested in football, for example, if I have 10 close girlfriends, maybe one of them is like me, so I think they don't grow up with this culture, with this knowledge and this hobby...

On the other hand, both fan groups express similar worries about security and economic challenges. Both fan organizations believe that women fans find it more difficult to attend all matches owing to security concerns and budgetary constraints. The following participant perspectives highlight this situation:

BF8:... Of course, finances are very important, and women may have difficulties in this issue...

FF2:... I think there is an economic part too...

BF5:... I believe that people may be uncomfortable with the actions of guys during such matches, but in general, they may desire to be more comfortable...

FF10:... When they arrived in Kayseri in from other places, I saw that the most of them were guys, however there were some ladies who were either spouses or wives. Because they felt unsafe...

The second most frequently expressed view by both fan groups is that sports are seen as a male domain. Participants stated that sports competitions and the atmosphere in the stands are generally seen as male dominated. This view was expressed equally by both fan groups. Participant opinions on this issue are as follows: "Well, it is actually very easy to go, but I think they would not go because men see sports as a much bigger priority, I mean, when I compare it with the people around me, because men see it as a much bigger priority." (BF2)

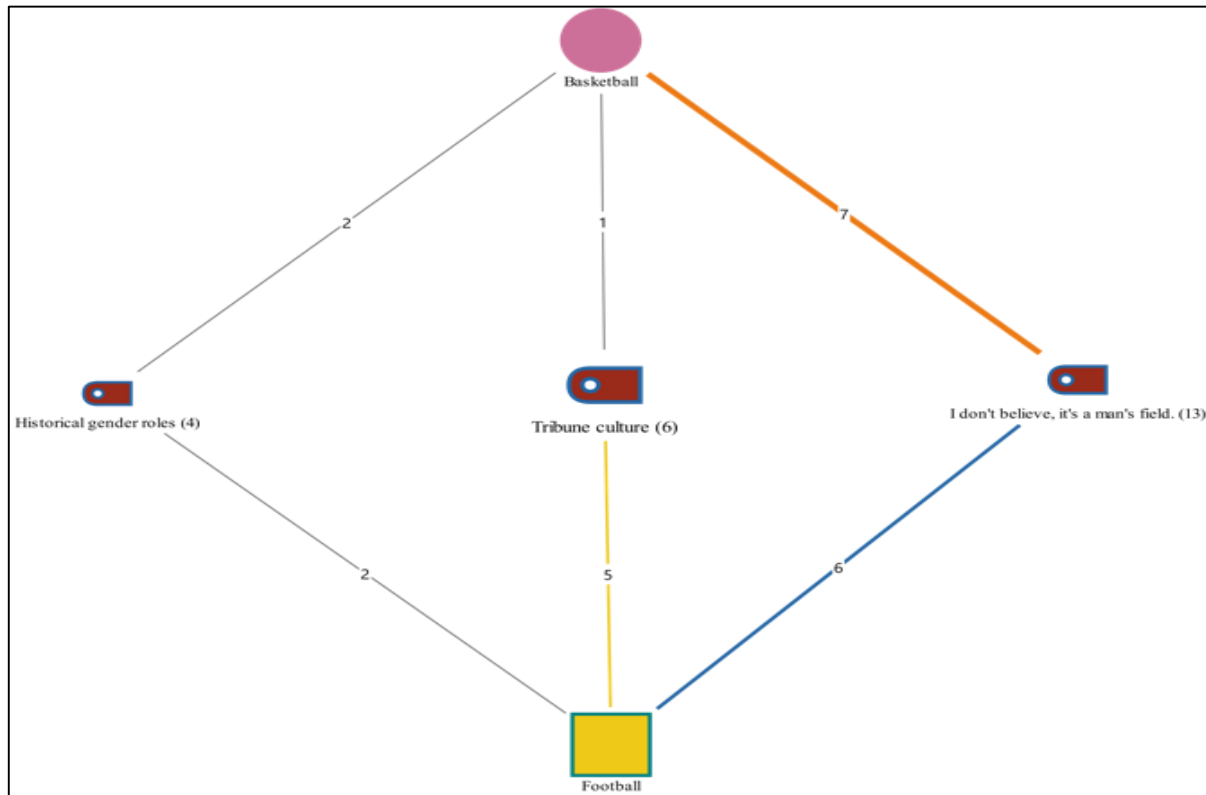


Figure 6. Reasons why fan is seen as a male domain

It is seen that the participants predominantly stated that they do not see fan as a male-domain. In recent years, with the increasing awareness and efforts on this issue, the participants state that fan is no longer limited to gender and that everyone has the right to participate equally in sports events.

According to the participants, tribune culture can sometimes create a belligerent, slang, competitive and masculine environment. This atmosphere may deter women or people with different gender identities from participating in sporting events. Therefore, interest in sporting events may lead to a more predominant male fan. Some of the participants' views on this issue are given below:

FF3:...I think yes, it's absolutely true because they are discharged and you can see it in their eyes, so for them it's like a happy space, I mean, it's an activity they do with their boyfriends, maybe they are married, but doing it once every 2 weeks makes them very happy, it's very obvious to them...

FF4:... There is a style there rather than men or women; I will say this, you don't need to swear at the match; for example, there have been many matches that I have watched without swearing at the match; I just mentioned, so you can go there and watch the match in a very quiet and calm manner, with my full attention, without shouting or swearing...

On the other hand, both women basketball fans and football fans stated that historical gender roles are one of the reasons why fan is seen as a male domain. According to these respondents, historically, in many societies, gender roles have been distinctly segregated. Men are often more visible in social roles, and this has been reflected in community activities such as sports fan.

Finally, Figure 7 shows the distribution of participants' opinions on verifying their fan identification.

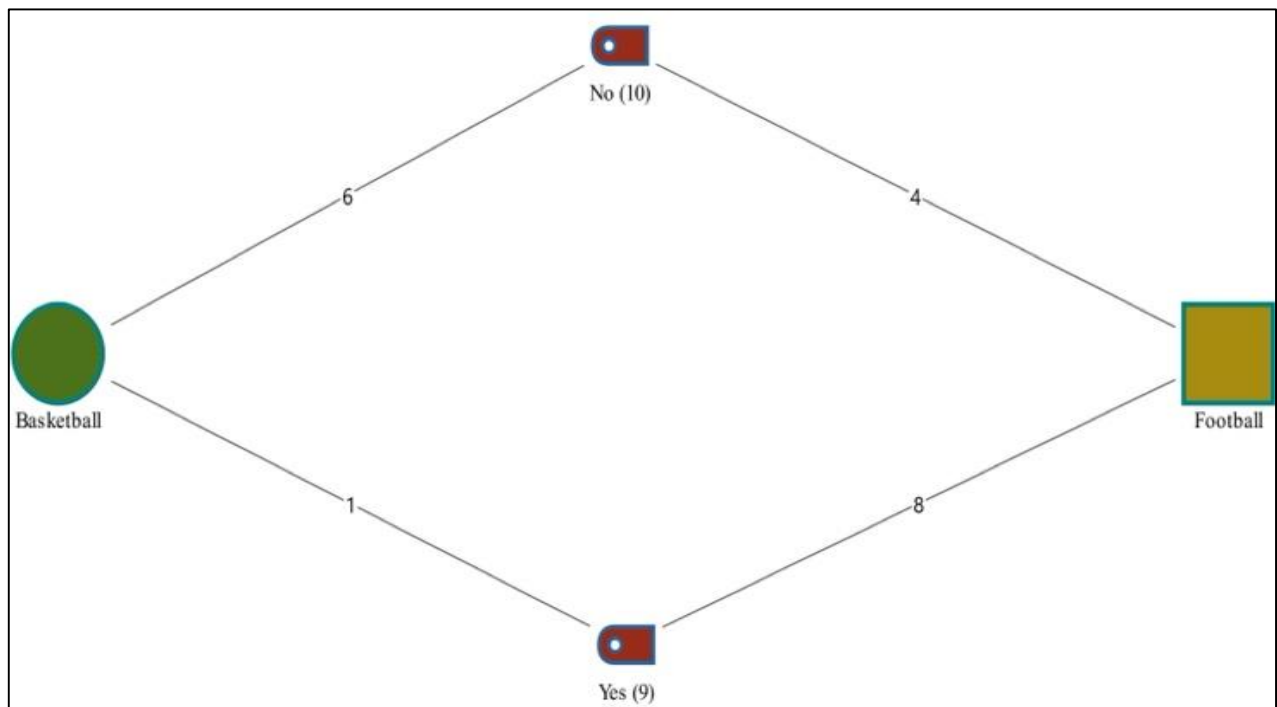


Figure 7. Having to Prove Identity to Male Fans

When the opinions of the participants are analyzed, it is seen that both fan groups mostly disagree with this statement, but the number of those who disagree with this statement is higher among women basketball fans. Women football fans who agree with this statement generally complain that their knowledge about fan is treated with suspicion. FF7 responded as follows: "Of course, I always had to prove it to all of them, they say the number of the 2003 squad, I count it and they say no, they say you have memorized it, and they don't believe it, to be honest". This situation can often be linked to social norms, gender expectations and sexist attitudes. Such pressures and coercion may prevent women fans from freely expressing themselves and being present at sporting events.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research analyzed the fan experiences of women basketball and football fans from a gender perspective. The difference between the experiences of women football and basketball fans revealed how fancy was defined, what it meant, and what emotional connections it contained. Women basketball fans perceived fancy as supporting a team or taking sides. Women football fans perceived fancy as a sense of belonging to a club. Both groups saw fancy as a passion and built their emotional bonds on providing spiritual support to their teams. Participants viewed actions such as buying a club's uniform,

purchasing a match ticket, or acquiring memorabilia as part of a fan culture. This was consistent with the findings of research that dealt with the phenomenon of subsidiarity. In a study of an Australian A-League football club, it was shown that fans with high levels of identification predominantly attended stadiums to watch the game in person, purchased team-related merchandise before and after the game, and prioritized the team (Rühl, 2010).

The views of the participants regarding the causes of giving up fans included personal reasons, team failure, and managerial issues. In terms of the relationship between the club management and supporters, there was believed to be no issue with loyalty to the team and not deserting it, provided that the management satisfied the fans' material and spiritual needs. Considering the relationship between fans and club management, it was stated that as long as the material and moral demands of the fans were met by the management, there would be no problem in terms of loyalty to the team and not leaving the team alone, but in some cases, conflicts might occur between the management and the group, which could result in the withdrawal of support for the team (Gürses & Semiz, 2021; Polat et al., 2019). These results suggested that several factors impacted the supportership experience and that female fans' involvement in athletic events was influenced by a dynamic process.

Although both fan groups believed the number of women fans increased, the participants' assessments of the increase in the number of women fans varied between football and basketball fans. Women basketball fans believed that increased economic freedom and sporting achievement were effective variables in increasing the number of women fans, whereas women football fans believed that increased economic power and improved security measures were effective. Being a fan entailed activities such as purchasing team merchandise and paying money to watch their team compete (Smith & Stewart, 2007). In patriarchal societies like Turkey, profound social and economic disparities between men and women rendered women economically dependent on men (Kasa & Alptekin, 2015). Women's economic empowerment typically allowed them to devote more time and resources to their hobbies and interests. In this setting, women with greater economic independence were freer to participate in sporting activities and pursue their interest in team sports. Women with more economic independence could challenge traditional gender roles and participate in male-dominated sports (Meier et al., 2020).

When the views of women fans on the identity of fans were analyzed, the participants' views on the reasons why it was more difficult for women to attend matches were examined, and it was discovered that both fan groups cited family responsibilities as an important factor that made it difficult for women to attend matches. As could be seen, numerous variables impacted the link between women's home chores and fans, including societal conventions, gender roles, and personal preferences. This outcome was consistent with earlier studies on gender roles. Gender roles were acquired from birth, but the learning process did not end there. The roles that men and women were taught varied in proportion to their ages. Furthermore, the extent of gender differences varied with age (Erdal, 2015). According to gender stereotypes, boys should play with manly toys like trucks, automobiles, and firearms. Girls should play with dolls and cooking utensils (Anderson & Stone, 1981). When men and women decided to establish a life together, their gender roles became apparent. Women were supposed to cook, iron clothing, and do the dishes. When a kid was born, the woman's obligations expanded to include childcare (Erdal, 2010). Men were not as responsible for domestic chores as women (Kasap, Dolunay, & Solman, 2018). Women's added duties frequently prohibited them from pursuing other interests (Yaprak & Amman, 2009).

Moreover, participants indicated that sports events and the atmosphere in the stands were dominated by men, with the perception that men placed a higher value on sports. In this context, whether participants regarded fan as a male domain was investigated, along with the reasons for supporting or

rejecting this concept. It was discovered that the aggressive, vulgar, competitive, and male atmosphere of fan culture had an effect. Finally, the participant who saw fan as a male domain said that gender roles historically demarcated (İlhan & Ünlü, 2019). In another research that fans this finding, Nuhurat (2017) contended that football is a gendered sport, with women reproducing it among football fans as part of a hegemonic masculine system. Despite these findings, most individuals felt that fan was not based on gender. However, fan culture and historical gender stereotypes compelled some participants to see fan as a male-dominated area. These findings highlighted the continuous need for initiatives to promote gender equality in sporting activities. On the other side, most participants felt that gender did not influence fan identification. This attitude may be linked to women's growing awareness of gender inequity. However, evidence suggested that women needed to be more conscious of gender inequity (Anisman-Razin et al., 2018).

As a result, although the number of women fans with diverse experiences is growing, there is still common notion that football is a male-dominated sport. Despite this popular notion, women emphasized that fan is gender neutral. Therefore, even though fan is a male-dominated sector, women are making efforts to increase their visibility in it. Because of gender norms, women must devote their leisure time to performing family tasks. Women's fans to make choices of their own free will is regarded taken away because of gender norms placed on them. As societal knowledge of gender equality grows, individuals may acquire more self-confidence to act as they see fit and freely pursue their interests regardless of gender. People who do not believe that gender is a deciding factor in problems such as sports fan can participate in the spirit of equality and awareness.

Author Contributions

This article is based on Serda Örnek's PhD Thesis.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare any conflict of interest regarding the study and its publication.

Ethical Statement

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