
TOWARD A TYPOLOGY OF DYSFUNCTIONAL FANS IN PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL

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Type: Scientific

Category: 8: Sport Fans (Diverse aspects of fan and audience motivation and behaviour)

Abstract

AIM OF THE PAPER AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Since sports play such an important economical, cultural and social role, it is important to better understand how and why they stir up so much passion among fans. For sport franchises and brand managers within these organizations, a good understanding of their consumers is critical to foster emotional attachment between their franchise and its fans and to capitalize on this attachment to build trust and ensure loyalty (Bobby, 2002). This synergy encourages fans to experience the brand both inside and outside the sporting arena, thereby generating additional revenue through sponsorship, retransmission rights and the sale of merchandise for the sport property (Gustafson, 2001).

However, sports' consumers are not all equally involved in their teams and therefore display different consumption patterns. Past research showed that only a limited share of attendance can be explained through socio-demographic variables and suggests that more creative segmentations are needed in this industry (Wann, 1995). Motivational, psychographic or commitment levels criteria have been used to segment the sport consumer market (Wann, Zapalac & Pease, 2008) and to propose potential typologies of sports spectators. Among sports' consumers, highly dedicated fans are often the focus of brand strategists as they are usually heavy buyers of merchandising products and contribute to the development and establishment of brand communities around the sport property (Richelieu & Pons, 2009). On the other hand, several authors have highlighted the ambivalence of some of these hardcore fans who are highly involved in the sport property but also adopt dysfunctional behaviors (Wakefield & Wann, 2006). These behaviors range from inappropriate and aggressive behaviors, use of

abusive language and excessive drinking, to constant complaining of team decisions.

This study focuses on the latter manifestation among these dysfunctional fans and aims at better understanding the mechanisms that explain why these fans spend their energy in constantly negating anything about the sport entity they live for and stand by. Another goal is to provide a typology of these fans using their rationales and motives to adopt such behaviours. Those elements will provide important managerial implications to the brand and the team marketing managers on how to deal with these fans.

METHODOLOGY

Using a mix of qualitative and quantitative analysis, the authors conducted in-depth interviews with highly dysfunctional fans that were very critical about the team they support. These fans were identified among 3210 respondents to a quantitative questionnaire distributed to registered users on a professional soccer team's website in Europe. In this survey, the authors asked sports fans from a specific soccer team to answer some questions about their relationships with the brand, their perceptions of the brand personality and their consumption behaviors. Around 10% (332 fans) had high identification levels with the team and high levels of complaining and dissatisfaction about the property's management decisions. The final sample for interviews was formed by 21 fans who agreed to talk about their views on the team, its meaning for them. Data were collected during one-on-one interviews, using a semi-structured questionnaire. Each interview was held at a team's facility and lasted approximately an hour.

RESULTS /DISCUSSION

The preliminary results offer patterns of rationale among respondents to explain their ambivalence toward the sport property they support. The interviews revealed a recurrent path for spectators in developing their attachment toward the team. Using these interviews, these dysfunctional fans can be classified in several groups according to their motivation to complain. First, there are the guardians who feel that they are the protectors of the team's values and that they have the right to complain. Also, there are the suspicious that have doubts about the management ability to help the team and thus, follow and criticize all the managers' decisions. The idealists are very critical about the sports business and consider that business should follow their rules. Finally, the tribe members use the team to develop a new group and believe that the tribe can only exist when it is contrasted with the team.

The results from those studies demonstrate that ambivalent fans are

typically members of extreme supporter groups. Often, they consume a very limited number of official team products; however, they are essential to the team's meaning system (ambiance, tradition, etc.) They are very attached to the team, but they want to differentiate from it and have more loyalty to their group. In general, they can be described as a nightmare for marketers, but an incredible asset to the team.

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