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## EXPLORING FAN-TEAM RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH THE LENS OF BRAND LOVE PROTOTYPE-EVIDENCE FROM PROFESSIONAL SOCCER

Abstract ID: EASM-2015-146 - (661)

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Date submitted: 2015-03-20

Date accepted: 2015-04-14

Type: Scientific

Keywords: brand love, fan-team relationships, fan typology

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

Synopsis:

Abstract:

AIM

Professional soccer is a growing and profitable industry which generates substantial amounts of money and its impact on retail should not be underestimated. It becomes a challenge for sport marketers to understand the underpinnings of fans' behaviour and also how to forge and sustain longitudinal fan-team relationships that can serve as a shield for football clubs against low profitability. Brand love is a concept that adds to our understanding of how consumers relate to their favourite brands and is considered as an outcome of brand relationships with conceptual and empirical implications. The purpose of this paper to explore the application of the brand love prototype concept (Batra et. al., 2012) in the field of professional football and by doing so to contribute to the broader discussion of the consumer-brand relationships theory.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Brands perform behaviour through techniques of anthropomorphism, have distinct personality, and are also capable of forging relationships with customers. The bulk of literature in sports marketing has come to the view that sport organizations should be run as businesses and the management of professional clubs, sport leagues, sport governing bodies should acknowledge branding as a tool to achieve long term value (Bristow & Sebastian, 2001). In this context, it is imperative to highlight the idiosyncratic nature of football brands as mirrored in the distinctive and phenomenal emotional responses they evoke to football fans. The strong affective component of football fan-team relationships which is rarely met in any other industry is the major differentiator of this entertainment sector in particular and provides a sound basis to investigate whether football fans' behaviour can be comprehended through the lens of brand love prototype. Football brands differ in strength compared to their mainstream counterparts, play crucial role in fans' life and the values

those brands are associated with are strong. Though we do not opine that the strength of football fan-team relationships are homogenous and can be attributed to all types of football fans, the zeal, the immersion, the dedication demonstrated by fervent football fans for their favourite team disables the transactional side of fan-team relationships as echoed by concepts such as brand loyalty to encapsulate the essence and the depth associated with fan's behaviour that resembles the mystical devotion demonstrated by believers of a religion (Fulconis & Pache, 2014). Carroll & Ahuvia (2006) define brand love as "the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied customer has for a particular trade name" (p.81) and Batra et. al. (2012) argue that brand love is a construct that goes beyond brand attachment and self-brand connections, a suggestion which provides an interesting avenue to investigate whether the brand love prototype can be used as an umbrella construct which embraces concepts suggested by academics (ie loyalty, allegiance, identification, attachment) in an attempt to explore team-fan relationships. This suggestion stresses the importance of fan-team relationships and subsequently features a relational perspective in sports marketing, one that is beyond the limited and myopic boundaries of a mere transactional approach abide by the principles of consumer brand relationships theory suggested by Fournier (1998).

#### METHODOLOGY

In order to understand whether the concept of brand love can be utilised for sports industries and to explore the structure of the dispersion of the attachment strength among different fan types, a qualitative exploratory research strategy was employed with fans of Coventry Football Club. Overall, 4 unstructured focus groups with 10 participants in each was conducted. The ratio was between male and female participants being 6 to 4, all of them fans of the football club. The participants' age ranges between 18-65 years old. Unstructured focus groups is deemed a good fit for the aim of this study as through focus groups the researchers can draw on participants' feelings, beliefs, experiences and reactions within a group context. The data was manually coded by the authors.

#### DISCUSSION

The indicative results show that a tiered fan typology (casual, devoted and fanatic) is seen among the participants of the club. These typologies of fans varied among the type of attachment they held for the club, which suggests that the concept of brand love is applicable to only a partial part of fans, whilst other frameworks (i.e. brand association) are more relevant to explain the behaviour of other types of fans to reach loyalty. These results have important implications for sports marketers as it is suggested different strategies should be adopted.

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Abstract report - EASM 2015