

"Once the Club, always the Club!" - Football Fans as Brand Communities?

Chris Horbel, University of Bayreuth - Department of Services Management, Germany,
chris.horbel@uni-bayreuth.de

Herbert Woratschek, University of Bayreuth - Department of Services Management, Germany

Bastian Popp, University of Bayreuth - Department of Services Management,

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Abstract

Study Background

In recent years the behavior of sport spectators has received increasing attention in the academic literature. Sport is a massive and still growing industry. Therefore, a better understanding of how and why sport fans go to a stadium, travel to away games of their team, consume media and buy merchandise is of great interest to sport marketers. In particular, football is perhaps one of the great phenomena in terms of attraction to people of every age, gender and nationality. A loyal fan base and thousands of occasional spectators come together in football stadiums around the globe every week to watch the games. Being a loyal fan of a football team is undoubtedly a highly meaningful activity for fans (Tapp, 2004). However, meaning is not only derived from a long-lasting relationship with a team but also from other ties that affect the relationship to the team, in particular the ties of fans among themselves. Therefore, the focus of this article will be the question: What do relationships mean to football fans and how do they affect their behaviors and loyalty to a team?

Theoretical Foundations

A good deal of previous research on sport spectator behavior has been conducted in the area of team sports. Most of the research from the field of sport economics is based upon the assumption that the primary reason for loyalty to a team is the so-called competitive balance (Schmidt & Berri, 2001, Vrooman, 1995). That means, the more uncertain the outcome of a game, the more interesting it is for spectators and the more people go to the stadium or watch it on TV. However, we believe that this perspective is too narrow to describe fan behavior. In the sport marketing literature, fan loyalty and identification with the team are seen as the main determinants of fan behavior. Within the field of fan loyalty, both behavioral and attitudinal loyalty has been investigated, e.g. game attendance (Laverie & Arnett, 2000), merchandise purchase (Derbaix, Decrop, & Cabossart, 2002), and self-perception of being a fan (Tapp, 2004). We propose that football games can be interpreted as manifestations of the sports club brand that stimulate social interaction between fans who are members of the brand interest group of the sports club. Games are events that allow the fans to sensually experience the cultural meaning of the sports club brand. Based upon these

considerations we suggest that football fans constitute brand communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Therefore, in this study will draw a picture on how football provides linking value between people (Cova, 1997).

Method and Results

The focus of our study was one particular group of fans, who we call fan tourists. As fan tourism we define a specific form of both sport tourism (e.g. Standeven, & DeKnop 1999), and event tourism (e.g. Getz, 1997), where a passive interest in sport is the main reason for traveling. In other words, a fan tourist is a fan who travels to watch an away game of a team. Ethnographic fieldwork consisted of 89 face-to-face depth interviews with fans of German professional and amateur football leagues conducted directly before or after games or in fan busses and fan trains as well as accompanying observations which were videotaped. Evident throughout the articulations of the informants are a number of analogies with brand communities, in particular identification with the team, reducing social isolation and building personal relationships to others, distancing from occasional spectators, carrying out common rituals as well as escape from everyday life and everyday role models (Kozinets, 2002, McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002, Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

Discussion and Implications

Like brand communities which are formed around a product or service brand, e.g. Harley Davidson (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), fan tourists can be described as a community formed around a particular sports club brand. Hence, in order to get a better understanding of the loyalty of football fans, we must try to better understand the role the brand community plays for their loyalty. The notion that the relationship of the fans to the club alone serves as a repository for meaning overlooks other relationships that provide significant value to fans. In particular, meaning is derived from social relationships to other fans. That means, by being loyal to other fans, loyalty to the club is increasing at the same time. So, in order to ensure loyalty of their fans sports clubs managers must find ways to contribute to the process of community building by creating the context in which fan interaction occurs.

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