

Attractiveness of National and International Football Leagues – A Perspective from Fans of “Underdogs” and “Star Clubs”

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Keywords: attractiveness, football, competitive balance, fans, Champions League, national league

Abstract

The goal of our study is to examine the attractiveness of professional football leagues from fans' perspective. We aim to determine what factors affect the attractiveness of national football leagues and how such relationships are viewed from fans of clubs from the top of the league table and from fans of clubs from the bottom of the league table. Another goal of our study is to compare the perceptions of football fans of teams of the English Premier League to the perceptions of football fans of the German Bundesliga and to relate these findings to the attractiveness of both the national leagues and the UEFA Champions League. The rationales for these comparisons are differences in the financial resources between clubs of a league and between clubs of leagues in different countries [3].

We propose that four determinants are relevant for the attractiveness of football leagues from fans' perspective: stadium atmosphere, international success of the clubs, uniqueness of a dominating club, and competitive balance. Stadium atmosphere stands for the entirety of emotionally affective stimuli in a sport stadium causing certain sensations and emotional reactions in individuals [2]. If fans perceive the national clubs of a league to be successful in international competitions, the glory might transfer to the attractiveness of the league in which they are playing. Most first division football leagues have one or two dominating clubs with a successful history of records. Games against these clubs entail highly intense emotions. Thus, this factor might also impact the attractiveness. However, we also expect competitive balance to be relevant. Competitive balance refers to “the rational expectations of fans about who will be the winners” [1]. We propose that the perceived fairness of the distribution of money from TV broadcasting fees positively affects the perceived competitive balance. We further expect some direct and moderating effects of a club's position („star team” versus “underdog”) and the league in which clubs are playing (Bundesliga versus Premier League) on the latent variables. The relationship between the perceived fairness of income from TV broadcasting fees, competitive balance, and attractiveness is also proposed for international competitions.

1,404 respondents participated in our study by filling out an online questionnaire in winter 2007/2008. To qualify, subjects had to be fans of one of the following teams: FC Bayern Munich, SV Werder Bremen, FC Schalke 04 (three star teams), Eintracht Frankfurt, VfL Wolfsburg, and Arminia Bielefeld (three underdogs) – all clubs of the German Bundesliga. In England, fans of the following teams participated in our study:

Manchester United, FC Chelsea, FC Liverpool (three star teams), FC Fulham, Aston Villa, and FC Middlesbrough (three underdogs).

The research model was tested using the partial least squares method of structural equation modeling (smart PLS). The model explains 31.8% of the variance of the attractiveness of national football leagues. The results show that competitive balance is the most important determinant of the attractiveness. This is true for both fans of underdogs and star teams. The second most important determinant for fans of the Premier League is stadium atmosphere. This factor also contributes to the perceived attractiveness from the point of view of fans of clubs of the Bundesliga. However, it is less important compared to the sample of fans of clubs of the Premier League. For German fans, the perceived international success of national clubs is another highly relevant factor for the attractiveness of the Bundesliga, whereas, in England, this relationship is not statistically significant. The uniqueness of Manchester United affects the perceived attractiveness of the Premier League. In Germany, the path between the perceived uniqueness of FC Bayern Munich and the attractiveness of the Bundesliga is not significant. On an international level, the competitive balance of the teams is a highly relevant factor for the attractiveness of the Champions League – for both fans of German clubs and English clubs.

The results show that even fans of financially privileged clubs concede that competitive balance is necessary for the attractiveness of the national and international leagues. However, we admit that our selection of determinants of the attractiveness of football leagues may not be finite. We did not consider the tradition and history of the sport clubs and the perception of match games as social venues, for example. Managers of sports clubs and associations can use these findings in order to keep their product as attractive as possible. This guarantees an impact on economic variables – such as income from game attendances and merchandising (as shown in our study) or income from media and sponsorships.

References

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