

"You'll Never Walk Alone" – How Loyal are Football Fans to Their Clubs when They are Struggling Against Relegation?

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Abstract

Being a fan is something that can give meaning to a fan's life. The goal of our study is to investigate the different psychological processes underlying loyalty toward professional football teams. We also analyze how fans' loyalty and their emotions are affected when their club is either relegated to a lower division of a league or remains in the top division. Studies of sports management have proposed a number of different constructs and models for assessing fan loyalty. For example, Wakefield and Sloan (1995, p. 159) define team loyalty as "an allegiance or devotion to a particular team that is based on the spectator's interest in the team that has developed over time." Fan loyalty has been investigated in the past using commitment or identification scales, satisfaction-loyalty models and a number of other frameworks. However, each of these approaches suffers from certain shortcomings.

In the first place, fan loyalty has mostly been treated as a one- or two-dimensional construct consisting of both behavioral and attitudinal measures. In both cases, the underlying psychological processes in fact often remain unclear. Secondly, some models lack empirical data to back them up. Of those that have been tested in practice, most have been applied to fans of American university sports teams, where there is no system of relegation. Thirdly, existing models fail to account for the depth of the relationship between fans and their clubs – a level of intimacy that often leads to them sticking together for years or even decades.

In response to these shortcomings, the present study looks at a number of indicators of relationship strength. These indicators are thought to be responsible for the strong bond that exists between fans and their clubs. Aaker, Fournier and Brasel (2004) suggest four relationship strength indicators between consumers and brands: satisfaction, self-connection, intimacy and commitment. We can apply these indicators to fans and their clubs. Satisfaction is a well-established construct in the marketing literature. Self-connection indicates the degree to which a club delivers on important elements relating to the fan's identity – expressing a significant aspect of the self [3]. Highly committed fans typically have an intimate relationship with their club, so we can refer here to intimate commitment – a factor combining Aaker et al.'s proposed indicators intimacy and commitment. Emotional achievement relates to fans' perception of the sense of accomplishment when their team performs well, and the positive emotions associated with this. The system of relegation in European football means that clubs are either promoted to higher divisions or relegated to lower divisions depending on their place in the league table at the end of a season. At present it is

unknown how fan loyalty is affected by relegation. Research into two tendencies that have been identified for sports fans – BIRGing ("basking in reflected glory") and CORFing ("cutting off reflected failure") suggest that relegation may result in a decrease in loyalty [2,5]. Other findings, mainly based on qualitative research with highly committed fans, suggest that there will be no change in loyalty [4,7].

To examine this question, we carried out a longitudinal field study in summer 2007. A group of 306 subjects participated in the study. To qualify, subjects had to be fans of one of four specific clubs playing in the highest level of the German football league system, the Bundesliga. We took measurements at two points in time. At t0, all four clubs were struggling against relegation. At t1, after the end of the season, two of the clubs were relegated to the second division while the other two remained in the first division.

The results of our study are revealing. Three of the four indicators of relationship strength – satisfaction, self-connection and intimate commitment – and the levels of BIRGing and CORFing did not decrease when clubs were relegated to the lower division. Indeed, the level of BIRGing, self-connection and intimate commitment actually increased.

Furthermore, we found that the struggle against relegation produces intense positive, negative and mixed emotions for fans. This was true irrespective of the outcome of the struggle – relegation or survival in the top division.

Our results support the notion that committed fans and their clubs stick to each other like glue. Fans take a long-term view when it comes to judging the success of their team, one that takes into account its history as well as its present performance. Here, additional factors may also be relevant for fans, such as the sense of belonging to a community.

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