

Session: **Managing sport in upcoming economic conditions**

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## **An Examination of the Effects of the Current Economic Downturn on Fan Behaviour at Everton Football Club**

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### Background:

The modern football fan is a significant source of income for many professional football clubs. The recent commodification and hyper-commodification of the football industry has changed the face of English football giving us the rich diversity of identity and expression that we now associate with the modern-day, football spectator (Giulianotti, 2002). Nash (1997) and Malcolm, Jones and Waddington (2000) lament the paucity of research regarding actual behaviour patterns of the current fan base. Deloitte (2009) and Virgin Money (2009) reported that it is essential for EPL clubs to increase their understanding of the influences that impact fan base behaviour. Both organisations stressed the importance for EPL clubs to maximise attendances to safeguard their future financial security.

### Objectives:

The present research focuses on one of the English Premier League's (EPL) founder members, Everton Football Club (EFC), and, endeavours to better understand the nature of football fan behaviour at a time of unprecedented economic uncertainty. Everton FC has made this issue one of their primary strategic goals (Everton FC, 2008).

### Method:

The study utilised Giulianotti's (2002) taxonomy of football spectators to construct a questionnaire to assess the effects of the current economic downturn upon the behaviour of different spectator types. Participants (n=142) were designated as one of four spectator identity types: 'followers' (n=40), 'supporters' (n=47), 'fans' (n=28) or 'flaneurs' (n=27).

### Results:

A Kruskal Wallace Test revealed significant differences between the groups regarding the extent to which they had been financially affected by the current economic downturn  $X^2(3, n = 142) = 33.040, P < 0.001$ . Post hoc Mann-Whitney U Tests revealed 'supporters' and 'followers' had reported being more financially affected than both 'fans' and 'flaneurs'. A Kruskal Wallace Test revealed significant differences between the groups in the extent to which the economic downturn had affected their attendance at Everton FC home matches  $X^2(3, n = 142) = 43.591, P < 0.001$ . Post hoc Mann-Whitney U Tests revealed that 'flaneurs' and 'fans' reported their attendance as being more affected than both 'followers' and 'supporters'. The more traditional spectators, 'supporters' and 'followers', reported being more financially disadvantaged by the economic downturn. However, the consumer oriented spectators, such as the 'fans' and 'flaneurs', reported

their attendance at Everton's home matches had been affected, during the downturn, despite having been less financially affected than the other two groups.

#### Conclusion:

The research appears to suggest an inelasticity of demand amongst more traditional core spectators such as 'supporters' which appears to be the product of their prolonged, local and cultural identification with the club (Giulianotti, 2002). However, more 'consumer' type spectators, such as 'flaneurs', through their market centred approach, appear to have an altogether more transient relationship with the club. These fans appear more vulnerable to external forces, not least the economic environment. Findings from the research are not intended to dictate policy, but aim to provide an insight into the behavioural patterns of the club's fan base, which may prove to be useful in the implementation of future marketing strategies.