

“TIPPEKAMPEN, TURKISH NIGHTS AND TORRES”: THE TEAM IDENTIFICATION OF SCANDINAVIAN LIVERPOOL FC FANS

Author:
Anthony Kerr

email:
a.kerr@latrobe.edu.au

University:
Centre for Sport and Social Impact - La Trobe University

Faculty:
Law and Management

Abstract

Aim of the abstract

Globalisation and improved communications technology, notably satellite television and broadband Internet, are important trends that have expanded the marketplace for professional sport teams. As a result, brands such as the English Premier League's (EPL) Liverpool FC have more than 100 million supporters and hundreds of fan organisations worldwide. Kerr (2009) calls these foreign fans, 'satellite supporters', and astute marketers should exploit the opportunities that these supporters represent. For instance, Scandinavia is a fertile market for English football and one Liverpool FC fan club in Scandinavia boasts 25,000 members. Given the importance of foreign consumers in an increasingly-competitive marketplace, this study addresses the challenge of understanding why these satellite supporters chose the Liverpool FC and identifies the key drivers of their consumer behaviour.

Theoretical background or literature review

An individual's decision to purchase a sport product is largely dependent upon their level of identification with a team. Team identification, or "the extent to which a fan feels psychologically connected" to a team (Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001, p. 3), is critical to the profitability of a sport organisation. Highly-identified fans are more likely to attend their team's games, monitor them in the media, purchase team merchandise and to recognise, and purchase, products from team sponsors. There has been considerable attention paid to the identification of domestic team fans, however, despite notable contributions (such as H. Hognestad, 2009; H. K. Hognestad, 2006; Nash, 2000), understanding why satellite supporters do so remains largely unexplored.

Methodology, research design and data analysis

This case study explores the identification of Scandinavian Liverpool FC satellite supporters and their membership in

a community that meets in cyberspace to celebrate their shared fandom. Founded in 1892, the Liverpool FC is the most successful club in the history of English football and will be long-remembered for their dramatic Champions League triumph over AC Milan. There are more than 200 online supporter branches affiliated with the club and this study was possible due to the cooperation of one such organisation, the Liverpool FC Supporters Club Scandinavian Branch (www.liverpool.no).

Respondents followed a link on the Norwegian website that led to www.surveymonkey.com and 941 questionnaires were completed. The supporters completed a range of questions that related to their initial decision to support the Liverpool FC (derived from a review of the team identification literature and earlier pilot studies), their loyalty to the club, and their sport consumption behaviour. Eleven respondents also agreed to participate in a 'virtual interview' conducted in an online chat-room. The questionnaire data was analysed using SPSS 15.0 while a colour-coded key was developed to isolate the themes that emerged from the interviews.

Results, discussion and implications

As many professional sport teams have become household names with millions of satellite supporters worldwide, in a changing global marketplace the challenge is to understand these consumers. This study highlights seven key drivers in their decision to support the Liverpool FC: i) media coverage; ii) style of play; iii) the presence of particular player(s); iv) team success; v) history of success; vi) stadium and vii) participation in the highest division. Furthermore, satellite television and official, and unofficial, supporter websites were, and remain, critical vehicles used by Scandinavian satellite supporters to express their passion for the English club.

English football broadcasts have historically fuelled Scandinavian interest in many British teams and the weekly Tippekampen was almost a cultural institution for many supporters. Moreover, while supporters highlighted the importance of team success, marketers are largely unable to control their core product, on-field competition. As a result, management should not focus on winning in their marketing campaigns but should rather manipulate other drivers in order to attract a larger international fan base – notably the team's international exposure, its style of play, player personnel, and the home stadium – or use the Internet to cultivate the satellite supporters of tomorrow. This study generates valuable insights into the psychology of these supporters, their allegiances and consumption behaviour. Such an outcome is invaluable for sport marketers who seek to capitalise on the opportunities presented by globalisation and improved accessibility to an international marketplace. Indeed, in a congested sport marketplace, satellite supporters may prove critical for the future of many sport franchises.

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