

LOVE FOR THE CLUB, LOVE FOR THE STADIUM?

THE INFLUENCE OF SPORTSCAPE PERCEPTION AND PLACE ATTACHMENT ON SOCCER ATTENDANCE AMONG BELGIAN FANS

Mariana de Carvalho (1&2), José Pedro Sarmiento (2), Filip Boen (3), Jeroen Scheerder (1)

1: Policy in Sports & Physical Activity Research Group, Department of Kinesiology, University of Leuven, Belgium

2: Sport Management Department, CIFI2D, Sports Faculty, University of Porto, Portugal

3: Physical Activity, Sports & Health Research Group, Department of Kinesiology, University of Leuven, Belgium

msmfcarvalho@gmail.com

Acknowledgements

This research was feasible due to a research grant received by Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (FCT), Portugal.

Keywords

Sport attendance, Soccer attendance motives, Soccer stadium, Sportscape perception, Place attachment, Team identification, Sport marketing, Belgium

Aim of the Paper

The quality of the venue where a certain event takes place is usually a condition *sine qua non* for the presence of spectators at the event, regardless of the specific core business. People do not accept going to a theatre performance and stand instead of sitting comfortably, or going to the movies and being presented with a dirty toilet, or even attending a conference and having to stand in the cold while listening to the keynote speaker. However, these situations do occur in soccer stadiums across Europe, even though soccer is an unavoidable phenomenon in our society, especially in Europe, and the biggest sport industry in the world (Giulianotti, 1999).

In Belgium, average attendance numbers are growing since 2005 (Mapfurno, 2013). In a study performed by The Portuguese Institute of Administration and Marketing, 'European Football Attendances Report 2011', the attendance of the main twenty national championships in Europe, with 322 clubs involved, and almost all the rounds (excluding play-offs), during seasons 2006-11, was analyzed (Sá & Malveiro, 2011). Belgium was in the eleventh place, with 8,953 spectators per game. In another study about the season 2009/10, the number of spectators was compared to the number of inhabitants. In this case, Belgium was in the third place of the ranking, with 32% of inhabitants attending at least one soccer game (Bolas, 2012).

The Royal Belgian Football Association is trying to change the image of the sport, for instance by promoting the national team "Red Devils" and by planning the construction of five brand new stadiums in collaboration with the clubs. Moreover, the federation and the clubs want to improve the number of people going to the stadiums and for that they want to assure a good

hospitality to the fans. But how does the stadium influences people in their attendance decisions? How do the sportscape factors define the motivation to go to the stadium? In addition, how does the meaning that the stadium and the home ground have to each fan influences his/her way of seeing the club, the games and the stadium itself?

The main objective of this paper is to investigate the influence of both sportscape factors and of place attachment on the attendance of Belgian soccer fans. We also want to understand for the first time how these two features relate with each other. Finally, we want to identify the marketing implications for the clubs when it comes to managing their venue and events.

Theoretical Background

Varied motives have been described to influence sports attendance at professional events. In 2007, Smith and Stewart specified factors as sport context, competition, physical environment, economic factors, promotional actions, and social context. In this research we are focusing on sportscape perception and on place attachment.

Sports cape

By the late 1980s stadiums across countries like France, Germany, Italy, and Spain upgraded their largest grounds to host major international tournaments (Giulianotti, 1999): functional exigencies (e.g. spectator safety, comfort and control, access to parking spaces, toilets and food kiosks), came to dominate the architectural philosophy. Later, other countries in Europe (e.g. Belgium, Portugal, or the United Kingdom) followed in this modernisation of the facilities. In this way, sportscape factors became more important and central to the clubs. According to Wakefield and colleagues, sportscape is defined as the physical environment of the stadium, and includes the interior and exterior 'fixed elements' such as stadium access, facility aesthetics, scoreboard quality, and perceived crowding (comprising seating comfort and layout accessibility – space allocation and signage) (Wakefield, Blodgett, & Sloan, 1996; Wakefield & Sloan, 1995). Even though the authors do not include non-fixed elements in the concept of sportscape, we propose that service quality (e.g. food service, stadium security, cleanliness) should be included in this concept, because they belong to the stadium factors and can be controlled by the facility management.

Sportscape factors have been found to positively influence the intention to attend sport events (Wakefield et al., 1996; Wakefield & Sloan, 1995). Findings from Hill and Green (2000) also show that stadium factors (i.e., the sportscape) can enhance the likelihood that supporters of the home team will attend future games. In three rugby games, these authors found that perceptions of the sportscape improved prediction of future attendance intentions for spectators supporting the home team in each of the three venues. However, the specific sportscape elements that best represented that effect were different in each case: parking, perceptions of cleanliness, quality of food and beverages, and the willingness to spend time in the stadium each predicted future attendance intentions.

Surprisingly, the perceived food and beverage quality was negatively related to future attendance motivations. Nevertheless, these findings suggest that stadium factors, i.e. the sportscape, can enhance the likelihood that supporters of the home team will attend future games. However, the impact of the sportscape above and beyond fan loyalty and the fan's psychological involvement with the sport was quite small for these spectators, ranging from only six to twelve percent improvement in prediction. From a marketing perspective, this implies that although elements of the sportscape warrant attention, the fundamental need is to build the spectator's psychological involvement with the sport itself, and to build loyalty to the team, which accounted for 28 to 53% of the variance in future attendance intentions for these spectators. In this way, we propose that *'a higher sportscape perception is positively related to attendance' (Hypothesis 1)*.

Westerbeek and Shilbury (1999) argued that in the marketing mix, the 'P' associated with place (e.g., the sport facility) has to be considered as the most important element, considering that the core service sport and its associated services are dependent on the facility for its production. Perception of service quality is known to increase the likelihood that customers will repeat purchases. Consumer satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) with core service elements has been shown to influence future buying behaviours across business contexts (Sivadas & Baker-Prewitt, 2000). These findings are also extendable to sport contexts. However, the moderating effect of team identification on the relationship between service quality perceptions and repeated purchase (i.e., attendance) intentions in professional sport contests also has to be taken into account (Hill & Green, 2000). Wann and Branscombe (1993) refer to the concept of team identification as the extent to which a fan feels psychologically connected, is involved with and has invested in the team, and sees the team as an extension of the self. Therefore, it is our hypothesis that *'the relation between sportscape perception and attendance is moderated by team identification' (Hypothesis 2)*.

Place Attachment (PA)

Studies in the leisure and tourism literature have shown that the place meanings can improve our understanding about aspects of an individual's leisure and tourism behavior (Alexandris, Kouthouris, & Meligdis, 2006). In soccer, the stadium is often called 'cathedral' or the place where the stadium is located is sometimes nominated as 'holy ground' (Costa, 1997). The stadium is frequently a special place to the fans, for one reason or another and, to some extent, their preferred soccer team's home stadium does represent home as well (Charleston, 2009). Thus, the ground where the game takes place, the home floor of a team, the meaning of the neighborhood where the stadium is located, can play a crucial role in the decision of the fan to attend a game.

PA refers to the extent to which a person has an emotional, functional, cognitive, symbolic, spiritual and/or affective connection to that particular physical place, environment, or setting in a particular condition and at a particular time; it is a fluctuating process also, through time (Moore & Graefe, 1994; Moore & Scott, 2003; Smaldone, Harris, Sanyal, & Lind, 2005). Other

authors gave the concept a different name, such as special places (Smaldone et al., 2005), place bonding (Hammit, Backlund, & Bixler, 2006; Kyle, Graefe, Manning, & Bacon, 2004a), sense of place (Hammit et al., 2006; Nanzer, 2004), 'rootedness', 'insidedness' or 'environmental embeddedness' (Hammit et al., 2006), but they always focus on the value people attribute to the place. The concept of place attachment has been used most of the time in recreational and natural setting (Kyle, Absher, & Graefe, 2003; Kyle, Graefe, Manning, & Bacon, 2003, 2004b).

However, in our perspective the concept can also fit when it comes to professional team sports and their stadium. De Carvalho and colleagues (2011) used the concept of PA in professional team sports. The degree and strength of this connection depends on a multitude of factors, including the physical characteristics of the place, the social relationships and experiences of the subjects involved, the activities or rituals done at the place, the individual's length of association with the place, as well as the individual's personal set of beliefs, values and preferences (Moore & Graefe, 1994; Smaldone et al., 2005). The more meaningful a destination is to the visitors, the less likely it is to be substituted by another place (Williams, Patterson, Roggenbuck, & Watson, 1992). In the sports attendance context this involves that a higher attachment with the stadium may lead to a higher desire to attend games. Thus we predict that *'a higher place attachment is positively related to attendance' (Hypothesis 3)*.

Methodology

Data Collection

The present study was conducted in Belgium, an emergent football country. People were invited to answer to an online survey through several social media: e-mail, Facebook pages (from the team of researchers but also the official pages of clubs or fan clubs), and blogs of the clubs. A popular Dutch newspaper also published the link on the paper and on the online version. Participants were addressed with a brief explanation about the content of the study and a request to fill out a twenty minutes survey voluntarily. As an extra motivation, a lottery of a prize was announced. Surveys were completed from half November 2012 to the end of January 2013. In this research we focused on Dutch-speaking Belgian fans from clubs playing in the first and second Belgian leagues, living at a distance from the stadium of their club no higher than four hours.

Instrument

The questionnaire consisted of three parts: the first part examined the person as a soccer fan; the second part investigated the reasons of the respondents to attend to soccer games and their consumption habits; the third part consisted of socio-demographic questions. Describing the survey more into detail, we find:

Part (i) – the person as a soccer fan including interest for soccer judged on 5-point scales (1 – *not interested at all* to 5 – *very much interested*); favourite professional soccer team; since what age he/she is a fan; reasons to become a fan, judged on 5-point scales (1 – *nothing* to 5 – *totally*); who were their socialisation agents in order to become a fan (Casper & Menefee, 2010); sport spectator identification scale; place attachment scale;

Part (ii) – socio-psychological motives scale judged on 5-point scales (1 – *totally disagree* to 5 – *totally agree*); number of home games attended during the season; number of away games attended during the season; time they take to the stadium (in minutes); time they dedicate to the team (in hours); motives for attendance scale, judged on 5-point scales (1 – *nothing* to 5 – *totally*); motives for non-attendance scale judged on 5-point scales (1 – *nothing* to 5 – *totally*); main measures that the clubs could take to make them attend to games (people had to choose the three main reasons);

Part (iii) – socio-demographic items (age, sex, origin, education, civil status, professional status, economic situation, favourite sport(s) to attend and to practice, and sports participation).

Sport spectator identification scale (SSIS)

A Dutch version of the SSIS (Theodorakis, Wann, de Carvalho, & Sarmiento, 2010; Wann & Branscombe, 1993; Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001) is used to assess levels of Team identification. The options range from 1 (*low identification*) to 7 (*high identification*). An example item is 'How strongly do you see yourself as a fan of your team?'. Several studies provided evidence regarding the SSIS's factor structure, internal consistency, test-retest reliability, and construct validity (Wann & Branscombe, 1993; Wann et al., 2001).

A Principal component analysis (PCA) was conducted on the 7 items of the SSIS with orthogonal rotation (varimax). The KMO measure verified the sampling adequacy for the analysis, $KMO=.89$. Bartlett's test of sphericity $\chi^2(21) = 15026.10$, $p < .001$, indicated that correlations between items were sufficiently large for PCA. An initial analysis was run to obtain eigenvalues for each component in the data. After analysis of the scree plot and eigenvalues together, two components were retained explaining 74% of the variance, one with six items and one with one item (Item 6 – 'How much do you dislike the greatest rivals of the team'). The SSIS with the 6 final items, showed a high reliability ($\alpha=.88$).

Place attachment scale (PAS)

The PAS (Kyle, Graefe, et al., 2004a; Kyle, Mowen, & Tarrant, 2004) was used. These authors tested the scale and reported good psychometric properties. The options range from 1 – *totally disagree* to 5 – *totally agree*. The scale was used for the first time in the context of professional soccer by de Carvalho and colleagues (2011). In this work, the scale was adapted to measure the attachment to a stadium (substituting the wording related to recreational settings with wording related to soccer). However, due to the extension of the survey, and after pilot-tests we decided to use only some items of the total PAS. The items that were retained correspond to the dimensions 'affective attachment' (three items) this is, current emotional connection with the stadium (e.g. 'I have a strong emotional bond with the stadium X'), and 'social bonding' (two items), this is, items related to the memories and nostalgia towards the place (e.g. 'I associate special people in my life with the stadium X'). We also conducted a PCA with the five items of the adapted PAS with orthogonal rotation (Varimax). The KMO measure verified the sampling adequacy for the

analysis, $KMO=.84$. Bartlett's test of sphericity $\chi^2(15) = 13304.36$, $p < .001$, indicated that correlations between items were sufficiently large for PCA. An initial analysis was run to obtain eigenvalues for each component in the data. Only one component with the 5 items was extracted explaining 61% of the variance. The PAS shows a high reliability through the Cronbach's Alpha ($\alpha=.87$).

Motives for attendance scale (MAS)

For the MAS items relative to sportscape perception (i.e. stadium aesthetics, crowding, parking, accessibility, hygiene, quality of food and drinks), game and management related issues, marketing actions and economic factors are included. This scale was elaborated by the authors, based on a sound review of the literature and a previous pilot-study.

A PCA was run on the 23 items of the MAS with orthogonal rotation (Varimax). The KMO measure verified the sampling adequacy for the analysis, $KMO=.92$. Bartlett's test of sphericity $\chi^2(253) = 44742.26$, $p < .001$, indicated that correlations between items were sufficiently large for PCA. An initial analysis was run to obtain eigenvalues for each component in the data. We extracted 5 components explaining 63% of the variance. The five components were distributed as follows: Component 1 – Socialization, 10 items ($\alpha=.88$); Component 2 – Sportscape perception, 4 items ($\alpha=.87$); Component 3 – Marketing actions, 3 items ($\alpha=.79$); Component 4 – Soccer quality, 3 items ($\alpha=.75$); and Component 5 – Proximity the team, with 3 items ($\alpha=.63$).

Sample

The sample consists of 4,431 respondents, 3,876 male (89.3%) and 463 female (10.7%) answers. The average age of the sample is 35.07 years old ($SD=15.51$). Most of the people are employed full time (56.4%) or are students (27.7%), with a high economic status ($\mu=3.63$ in a 5 point scale).

When it comes to 'fanographic' characteristics, participants have a high interest for soccer ($\mu=4.69$; $SD=0.56$), a high identification with the team ($\mu=5.48$; $SD=1.02$), and a high place attachment to their home stadium ($\mu=2.96$; $SD=0.96$). 4270 people (96.4%) are fans from a club playing in the first league and 89% have soccer as their favourite sport to attend or to watch on television. Besides, soccer is also their favourite sport to practice (45.6%) but they do not perform it very often, considering that 49.5% of the people are only partaking in sports once a week or less. They attended an average of 8.69 home games during last season ($SD=7.77$), with around 30 percent of people attending two or less games. Around 40% have a season ticket to attend games of their team. Half of them dedicate less than three hours a week to the club and the other half between three and six hours.

Data Analysis

Descriptive and multivariate analyses were carried out using SPSS 20.0. A multiple regression was conducted to understand the different weight of the factors referred to before.

Results and discussion

Multiple linear regression was employed, and the overall model explained 30.6 percent of the variability on home games attended the previous season, which is a considerable value. In step 1, geo-demographic variables as age, sex (0=Female and 1=Male), financial status and living distance from the stadium were included ($R^2=.03$, $F(4,3832)=24.21$, $p<.001$). In step 2, 'fanographic' variables as the SSIS, number of years as a fan and age they became a fan were included ($R^2=.19$, $F(3,3829)=309.21$, $p<.001$). Finally in step 3, our main variables were added: the five components of the MAS and the only component of the PAS ($R^2=.09$, $F(6,3823)=86.39$, $p<.001$).

In the final model, the following variables had significant positive relation with home attendance: sex ($\beta=.03$, $p<.05$); age they became a fan ($\beta=.04$, $p<.05$); SSIS ($\beta=.29$, $p<.001$); PAS ($\beta=.08$, $p<.001$); MAS – component 1, socialization ($\beta=.27$, $p<.001$). The following factors had significant negative relation with home attendance: living distance from the stadium ($\beta=-.15$, $p<.001$); MAS – component 3, marketing actions ($\beta=-.23$, $p<.001$); MAS – component 4, soccer quality ($\beta=-.12$, $p<.001$).

These results support Hypothesis 3, as a higher place attachment implies a higher attendance at home games. This results support results of previous studies performed in touristic natural settings (Williams et al., 1992).

On the contrary, Hypothesis 1 was not supported. Maybe this result is related to the fact that stadiums in Belgium are old and have insufficient conditions. By answering to these questions participants may have underrated them because they were not thinking only about their own opinion but about the sportscape of Belgium stadiums. Another possible reason is that the sample constitutes a highly identified group with their team ($\mu=5.48$; $SD=1.02$). It is possible that sportscape perception does not affect their attendance because they will attend, no matter how bad the stadium conditions are.

Hypothesis 2 was not confirmed by the data. However, in a non-significant way, sportscape perception is more negatively related to attendance for higher identified fans ($\beta=-.03$, $p=.08$) than for lower identified fans ($\beta=-.01$, $p=.94$). Nevertheless, due to recent data collection and data cleaning, further analyses and interpretations are in progress.

Conclusions and implications

From the findings of our study we can conclude that attendance is affected by a multitude of factors, which are interrelated with each other. This is in line with previous research.

Place attachment proved to be a stronger predictor of attending home games than the sportscape perception. Therefore, to enhance the feeling of place attachment, possible strategies to bring fans into the club/venue and to increase revenues are, among others, season tickets including visits to the back of the house of the stadium (dressing rooms, meeting rooms, etc.), marketing actions outside the stadium before and after the game, organization of activities at the venue for the fans besides the game itself, or historical overviews through the years, showing videos with great victories of the club in that stadium.

Future research should focus on relating sportscape perception and place attachment with several other

variables besides team identification. It would also be of interest to understand whether the way people became a fan and the socialization agents are related to the meaning of the stadium to them throughout life.

References

- Alexandris, K., Kouthouris, C., & Meligdis, A. (2006). Increasing customers' loyalty in a skiing resort The contribution of place attachment and service quality. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality*, 18(5), 414-425.
- Bolas, N. (2012). Estudos e Rankings Europa – Espectadores vs Receitas e População. *Futebolfinance*. Retrieved from <http://www.futebolfinance.com/europa-espectadores-vs-receitas-e-populacao> website:
- Casper, J., & Menefee, C. (2010). Prior Sport Participation and Spectator Consumption: Socialization and Soccer. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 10(5), 595-611.
- Charleston, S. (2009). The English football ground as a representation of home. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*(29), 144-150.
- Costa, A. d. S. (1997). *À volta do estádio - O Desporto, o Homem e a Sociedade* (1ª Edição ed.).
- de Carvalho, M., Theodorakis, N., & Sarmento, J. P. (2011). Translation and Portuguese Validation of the Place Attachment Scale. *Variorum*, 1(IV), 1-11.
- Field, A. P. (2009). *Discovering statistics using SPSS (and sex and drugs and rock'n'roll)* (3rd ed.). London.
- Giulianotti, R. (1999). *Football - A Sociology of the global game*. Cornwall: Polity Press.
- Hammitt, W., Backlund, E., & Bixler, R. (2006). Place bonding for recreation places: conceptual and empirical development. *Leisure studies*, 25(1), 17-41.
- Hill, B., & Green, B. C. (2000). Repeat Attendance as a Function of Involvement, Loyalty, and the Sportscape Across Three Football Contexts. *Sport Management Review*(3), 145-162.
- Kyle, G., Absher, J., & Graefe, A. (2003). The Moderating Role of Place Attachment on the Relationship Between Attitudes Toward Fees and Spending Preferences. *Leisure Sciences*(25), 33-50.
- Kyle, G., Graefe, A., Manning, R., & Bacon, J. (2003). An Examination of the relationship between leisure activity involvement and place attachment among hikers along the Appalachian Trail. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 35(3), 249-273.
- Kyle, G., Graefe, A., Manning, R., & Bacon, J. (2004a). Effect of Activity Involvement and Place Attachment on Recreationists' Perceptions of Setting Density. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 36(2), 209-231.
- Kyle, G., Graefe, A., Manning, R., & Bacon, J. (2004b). Predictors of Behavioral Loyalty Among Hikers Along the Appalachian Trail. *Leisure Sciences*(26), 99-118.
- Kyle, G., Mowen, A., & Tarrant, M. (2004). Linking place preferences with place meaning: An examination of the relationship between place motivation and place attachment. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*(24), 439-454.

- Mapfurno, T. (2013). Attendances Belgie. *European Football Statistics*. Retrieved from <http://www.european-football-statistics.co.uk/index1.htm> website:
- Moore, R., & Graefe, A. (1994). Attachments to recreation settings: the case of rail-trail users. *Leisure sciences*, 16(1), 17-31.
- Moore, R., & Scott, D. (2003). Place attachment and context: comparing a park and a trail within. *Forest Science*, 49 (6): 877-884.(6), 877-884.
- Nanzer, B. (2004). Measuring sense of place: a scale for Michigan. *Administrative Theory & Praxis*, 26(3), 362-382.
- Sá, D., & Malveiro, P. (2011). *European Football Attendances Report 2011*. Gabinete de Estudos de Marketing para Desporto do IPAM. IPAM.
- Sivadas, E., & Baker-Prewitt, J. (2000). An examination of the relationship between service quality, customer satisfaction, and store loyalty. *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*, 28(2), 73-82.
- Smaldone, D., Harris, C., Sanyal, N., & Lind, D. (2005). Place Attachment and Management of Critical Park Issues in Grand Teton National Park. *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration*, 23(1), 90-114.
- Smith, A., & Stewart, B. (2007). The Travelling Fan: Understanding the Mechanisms of Sport Fan Consumption in a Sport Tourism Setting. *Journal of Sport & Tourism*, 12(3-4), 155-181.
- Theodorakis, N., Wann, D., de Carvalho, M., & Sarmento, J. P. (2010). Translation and Initial Validation of the Portuguese Version of the Sport Spectator Identification Scale. *North American Journal of Psychology*, 12(1), 67-80.
- Wakefield, K., Blodgett, J., & Sloan, H. (1996). Measurement and Management of the Sportscape. *Journal of Sport Management*, 10, 15-31.
- Wakefield, K., & Sloan, H. (1995). The Effects of Team Loyalty and Selected Stadium Factors on Spectator Attendance. *Journal of Sport Management*, 9, 153-172.
- Wann, D., & Branscombe, N. (1993). Sport fans: Measuring degree of identification with their team. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 24, 1-17.
- Wann, D., Melnick, M., Russell, G., & Pease, D. (2001). *Sport fans - The Psychology and Social Impact of Spectators*. New York: Routledge.
- Westerbeek, H., & Shilbury, D. (1999). Increasing the Focus on "Place" in the Marketing Mix for Facility Dependent Sport Services. *Sport Management Review*, 2, 1-23.
- Williams, D., Patterson, M., Roggenbuck, J., & Watson, A. (1992). Beyond the commodity metaphor: Examining emotional and symbolic attachment to a place. *Leisure sciences*, 14, 29-46.