

Reactance to “modern football”: survey findings on committed fans in Germany

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Synopsis

The study analyses the question whether the past market growth of European football may be put at risk if a sizeable group of critical fans are diverted by the current development of “modern football.” A large online survey (N=1,021) of committed fans in German professional football was conducted. Ordered probit regressions are run on a construct of commercialisation criticism with independent variables from batteries of items on issues like attendance behaviour, membership/identification, attitudes toward “modern football,” behavioural intentions and sociodemographics. Overall, attitudes toward critical issues in the commercialisation of football strongly explain non-reactance while critique of the club governance and intentions to change the behaviour weakly explain reactance. Though 55% dislike commercialisation, only less than 20% intend to change their behaviour or even drop out. Thus, currently in German football, there is no urgent risk of a sizeable decline in demand of dedicated fans.

Aim of abstract/paper – research question

Both in the public debate and in the sociological literature, concerns are raised that current football governance in Europe is overdoing commercialisation and thus might jeopardize “fan culture.” From an economics and management perspective, the question arises whether the past market growth of European football may be put at risk if a sizeable group of critical fans are diverted by the current development of “modern football.” Yet, targeted empirical studies on the magnitude and internal structure of fans’ attitudes toward commercialisation are missing in the literature. While Garcia and Welford (2015) find a divide in the social science literature to coherently underpin the need of more involvement of fans as stakeholders in football governance, the sports economics literature on attendance is silent about the problem (see, e.g., Villar & Guerrero, 2009).

Literature review

Under the impression of the far-reaching transformation of English football following the introduction of the Premier League in 1992, Giulianotti (2002) wrote an influential article describing a “broad trend in sports identification” away from the “supporter model” toward the more detached consumer-orientated identification of “the flâneur.” According to his often cited “taxonomy of spectator identities in football,” the flâneur as a customer-type stadium attendee is increasingly focused by the football governing bodies while more committed supporters, followers and fans are less so. More than a decade after Giulianotti’s article, for instance, Kennedy and Kennedy (2012) and Webber (2015) observe creative responses and resistance of a variety of fan groups against a pure “customer model” of football governance. Particularly in the heavily market and

investor orientated governance model of English football, there is an emerging movement “Against Modern Football.”

Methodology, research design and data analysis

Therefore the present paper analyses a large online survey (N=1,021) of committed fans in German professional football. Germany is insofar an interesting case as it is perceived as the football market which is most sensitive in Europe towards an alleged “overcommercialization” (Webber, 2015). So the German Football League (DFL) decided to preserve standing areas in the stadia and keep the ticket prices stable, especially in the low categories where the most dedicated and chanting fan groups like the Ultras gather. Moreover, the so-called “50+1-Rule” prevents (unfriendly) takeovers of football clubs by investors coming from outside of the football industry. However, fan protests also arise in Germany which may risk ambience and value co-creation in the stadia (Stieler, Weismann & Germelmann, 2014). Due to the lack of comparable analyses, this study refers to the concept of reactance in organizational change (e.g., Nesterkin, 2013). On a 5-point Likert scale, it is measured by the key judgement: “The commercialisation in football harms the fans.” Then, ordered probit regressions of the construct are run on batteries of items on issues like attendance behaviour, membership/identification, attitudes toward “modern football,” behavioural intentions and sociodemographics.

Results, discussion and implications/conclusions

Overall, attitudes toward critical issues in the commercialisation of football strongly explain non-reactance while critique of the club governance and intentions to change the behaviour weakly explain reactance. Though 55% dislike commercialisation, only less than 20% intend to change their behaviour or even drop out. But it should also be noted that 49% are reluctant to international competitiveness of German football as well as that 65% criticize the club governance. Thus, currently in German football, there is no urgent risk of a sizeable decline in demand of dedicated fans. Yet, the risk is clearly detectable and symbolic steps toward more commercialisation like, for instance, questioning the “50+1-Rule” should be treated with care by the DFL.

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