

Fan Engagement Value In Team Sport: Service-Dominant Logic Informed Dimensions

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Aim of the paper

Fan engagement is central to the customer relationship management (CRM) of professional sport teams. However, previous research relating to fan engagement is limited regarding the following aspects: 1) it does not provide a holistic perspective on both positive and negative facets of fan engagement, 2) it uses a narrow definition of fan engagement that only refers to non-transactional behaviors, and 3) it only focuses on specific forms of fan engagement (e.g., fan-fan interactions). To resolve these issues, this research uses Hollebeek, Srivastava, and Chen's (2016) service dominant-logic informed framework of customer engagement and explores value dimensions of fan engagement in team sports. In so doing, we explore how fans can become 'game changers', that is, affect a team's economic and on-pitch performance.

Literature review

We extend Yoshida, Gordon, Nakazawa, and Biscaia's (2014) definition of fan engagement and define the construct as a fan's motivationally driven, volitional investment of resources into interactions with a sport team. The service-dominant logic and the concept of resource integration (Hollebeek, Srivastava, & Chen, 2016 in the service literature; Woratschek, Horbel, & Popp, 2014 in the sport domain) provide the basis of our work. Fan engagement cannot take place without resource integration by the fans. According to Hollebeek et al.'s (2016) framework, knowledge sharing, resource integration, and learning are foundational processes of engagement, while individual and interpersonal resource development and co-creation are benefits of engagement. In addition to this conceptualization, Stieler, Weismann, and Germelmann's (2014) work on fan co-destruction of value and Uhrich's (2014) typology of fan-fan value co-creation behaviors inform our framework. Based on this previous work, we assume that fan engagement is a multi-faceted construct including both value benefits and value detriments.

Methodology, research design, and data analysis

Our empirical study aims to identify specific sub-categories of both the foundational process and the benefits of fan engagement mentioned above and to explore how fans can become game changers. The exploratory nature of our research goals indicates that a qualitative design serves the study's purpose best. We considered sport teams of the first or second division of five prominent team sports in Europe. Most informants had the position of a marketing manager and came from seven countries (Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Poland, Sweden, and Switzerland). In-depth interviews were held over a three-month period and the managers were asked about their team's fan engagement. The interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and the content analysis of the interviews was assisted by MAXQDA.

Results, discussion, and implications

Fan engagement plays an important role in influencing outcomes that matter to the team. Based on the data, we identified two sub-categories of knowledge sharing (i.e., fans act as ambassadors for the team or as team destructors) and five sub-categories of value co-creation (e.g., fans as CRM Managers, sponsorship advisors, and product developer). Furthermore, we identified two sub-categories of fan learning (e.g., knowledge creator) and seven sub-categories of resource development (e.g., development of fandom, team value internalization). We found positive and negative characteristics in all sub-categories.

From the perspective of some managers, fans are considered as an additional team member (extended team). For example, players' motivation can increase via a stimulating atmosphere. In a negative sense, games can be interrupted (or ended earlier) when fans throw things on the pitch, an indicator that fans change the flow of the game in a negative sense. These facets indicate that fans can become game changers in that they significantly influence the club's on-pitch or business success (or important determinants of business success). Our data showed further that game changing behaviors, as the fifth dimension, work via two pathways: fans can be considered as 'creative co-creators' based on their tendencies to share knowledge and co-create value with others, or they can be considered as 'creative developers' based on their tendencies to learn and develop resources.

We contribute to the sport management literature by exploring the sub-categories of five value dimensions of fan engagement in team sports. Extending the existing literature, we identified both positive and negative characteristics of fan engagement, deliver a broader perspective of the construct with transactional and non-transactional behaviors and included different forms of interactions (e.g. fan–fan and fan–club interactions). With our holistic perspective of fan engagement, we seek to help future research capture the phenomenon of fan engagement more holistically and relate it to various phenomena.

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