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Citation: Hart, David (2012) Club versus Country? An investigation into attitudinal and behavioural loyalty towards club and national football teams. In: AM2012 - Academy of Marketing Conference 2012: Marketing: catching the technology wave, 2nd - 5th July 2012, Southampton, UK.

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Club versus Country?

An investigation into attitudinal and behavioural loyalty towards club and national football teams

Introduction

A substantial body of literature exists which acknowledges the peculiarities of brand loyalty in the context of sport, and in particular football. This work spans a range of disciplines from business and marketing through to sport administration, economics and sociology. Loyalty towards sports teams is seen to be of higher importance (Tapp, 2004) and results in higher levels of attachment (Sutton *et al*, 1997) than typical consumer brands.

In this field work has largely focused upon understanding how fan loyalty translates into sporting event attendance (e.g. Czarnitzki and Stadtmann, 2002), or developing typologies of fan behaviour that allow fans to be categorised dependent on their level of loyalty (Stewart, Smith and Nicholson, 2003, provide a useful review of such studies). Unsurprisingly, almost all of this research has been conducted based upon followers of club level as opposed to international level teams, an emphasis which is understandable given that club level sport is more a regular and accessible occurrence to most spectators. However, this has left a significant gap in the literature which has yet to be addressed: loyalty towards international teams. Despite some valuable work in the field of sociology (e.g. investigating the link between patriotism and sports events: Garland, 2004; Vincent *et al*, 2010) the literature has to date failed to address how the concept of fan loyalty may apply in an international context.

The notion of the ‘club versus country’ debate, which refers to an individual’s relative allegiance to either club or national teams, is one that is applied to both players and supporters and regularly appears in the media. There have been high profile examples of players opting to publicly prioritise one commitment over another which is often a source of major debate amongst pundits. Indeed, some have argued that England’s disappointing showing in the 2010 FIFA World Cup may in part be down to players over-exerting themselves at club level prior to the tournament. However, the loyalty of fans towards their respective club and national teams has not previously been addressed via academic study. Tapp (2004) has suggested that that two may be interrelated: for example, the success of a national team may have a ‘trickle down’ effect, resulting in greater levels of loyalty at club level.

The current study has two objectives. Firstly, it seeks to understand the relationship between the loyalty of football fans towards their respective club and international football teams. Given that travelling to support any team involves a substantial commitment of money and time (Wakefield and Sloan, 1995), it could be argued that few fans will have the resources available to allow for regular attendance at both club and country matches. Secondly, the study will investigate if loyalty towards either club or international football teams varies by level (i.e. the division in which the club team competes). Throughout this study, loyalty will be considered as “an allegiance or devotion to a particular team that is based on the spectator's interest in the team that has developed over time. A loyal team fan does not desert the team when its win-loss record is not competitive” (Wakefield and Sloan, 1995, p. 159). This definition recognises that loyalty contains an attitudinal component (often referred to as the level of commitment held towards a team) and also a behavioural component (which would encompass attendance, purchase of merchandise etc.). Attitudinal and behavioural loyalty are widely recognised as distinct forms of loyalty (Dick and Basu, 1994; Gahwiler

and Havitz, 1998) and in the context of sports one can exist without the other (Trail, Robinson, Dick and Gillentine, 2003).

Fan Loyalty

Hunt, Bristol and Bashaw (1999) noted that fans can be identified at the level of sport (football), team (Manchester United), league (Premier League) or even player (Wayne Rooney), with loyalty existing at each level. Within the supporter base of any team, there is likely to be variance in the level of commitment shown. For example, Sutton *et al.* (1997) clustered fans into three groups: 'social', who seek entertainment from sport; 'focused', who are motivated by success; and 'vested', who have a strong relationship with the team. Crawford (2003) has suggested that fans may embark on a career path which may start with a fleeting involvement that in time develops into deep passion for and involvement in the team. Such loyal fans have elsewhere been characterised as being tribal groups of devotees (Cova and Cova, 2002), having a sense of ownership of the club (Adamson, Jones and Tapp, 2006) and being more prone to emotional reactions during a match (Richardson, 2004).

It is at this point useful to consider the relevance of team success on levels of fan loyalty. Tapp (2004) commented that a review of football attendance figures shows a significant correlation between club support and level of success, a finding which in essence questions the loyalty of many sports consumers. As Smith and Stewart conclude "fans can be incredibly loyal, but they can also be fickle and critical" (2007, p. 156). However, authors have identified examples where club support has actually been galvanised by failure (Manchester City in the UK: Tapp, 2004; and Borussia Monchengladbach in Germany: Czarnitzki and Stadtmann, 2002). Further to this, the bond between fans and their clubs can actually strengthen as a result of relegation to a lower league (Koenigstorfer, Groeppel-Klein and Schmitt, 2010), despite relegation causing similar levels of psychological distress as physical threats or natural disasters (Banyard and Shevlin, 2001).

McDonald, Karg and Lock (2010) have identified that it is not uncommon for fans to actually follow multiple teams, be they from different leagues or even sports. Such behaviour can be done in a way as to avoid any potential conflict and allows fans to follow a 'second-team' on a complementary rather than a competitive basis. This is an idea that certainly appears applicable to the club versus country debate, where a fan may passionately follow both club and national teams without the fear of them competing against one another.

Major international tournaments such as the World Cup boost overall levels of football interest in the UK (Mintel, 2010), and given major tournaments only occur every two years, it is inevitable that loyalty towards the England team will peak around these times. Fans supporting their national team abroad have in many cases planned their journeys long in advance and develop bonds with fellow fans referred to as 'temporal togetherness' by Crabbe (2008). However, Giulianotti (2002) has argued that the atmosphere experienced at national games is only a sanitised version of what is evident at club matches, and Mintel (2010) highlighted that international fan loyalty is more dependent on success than at club level, implying that fans can be more fickle at international team level. However, what has not been addressed in previous research is the relationship between loyalty towards club and country teams: that is, are loyal fans of a club team more likely to display loyalty towards their national team?

Method

Participants

In line with Hill and Green's (2000) view that much sports consumer research does not sample fans from a range of teams and divisions, the current study considered fans from each of the top four divisions in English football (from the Premier League to League Two). In order to generate a comparative number of responses from each league, four teams were chosen at each level, giving a total of 16 teams. To select clubs, average attendance figures from the 2009/10 football season were obtained (as an indicator of supporter base) and used to segment each division into four quartiles, with a team then selected at random from each quartile. Care was taken to ensure that selected teams are also due to play in the same division in the 2010/11 season, to eliminate any bias that may be a result of recent relegation or promotion (Koenigstorfer, Groeppel-Klein and Kunkel, 2010).

Measures

After indicating which of the selected club teams they supported, respondents then completed two sections which analysed their loyalty firstly towards their club side and subsequently to the English national team (both sections contained the same items to allow for a statistical comparison of the two). Scales for attitudinal and behavioural loyalty developed by Bauer, Sauer and Exler (2008) were adopted for this study. The scales were found to be structurally sound and only minor changes to the scales were required. For example, whilst the original authors had removed items pertaining to watching football on TV, these were reinstated as for some fans this may be the only viable means of following international football. Respondents also provided demographics details at the end of the survey.

Procedure

Conducting surveys at football stadia focus the sample on actual match attendees (who may be deemed behaviourally loyal fans) but simultaneously neglect those attitudinally loyal fans who may not be able to attend for valid reasons such as ticket availability or financial constraints. Whilst many other studies of fan loyalty have collected data at actual sporting events, the current study opted to utilise online football forums for each of the teams sampled. Fan forums have been utilised in prior studies of fan loyalty and identification (Richardson, 2004) as such online communities represent an important source for marketing researchers (Kozinets, 2002). Prior to administration of the main study, a pilot was conducted with fans of an additional football club (N = 89) via the same online approach. Analysis of the pilot data showed all scales to have high internal reliability.

Current Status of the Study

A total of 719 usable surveys were collected for use in the current study. The sample includes a suitable range of responses from each of the four divisions targeted: Premier League 91 (12.7%), Championship 175 (24.3%), League One (282 (39.2%) and League Two 171 (23.8%). In line with national football league attendance statistics, the majority of the sample were male (669, 96%). A significant proportion of the sample were aged 18-24 (213, 30%), single (308, 42%) with no dependants (443, 62%), however 239 (33%) were married and 199 (28%) had one or two dependants. Data Analysis is currently taking place and whilst the results are not ready to be included in this submission, full analysis of the figures will be available for discussion at the Academy of Marketing Conference should the paper be accepted.

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