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**Attitudinal constructs in football fans and their relation to the football market**

Summary

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Research Problem

Unlike for a conventional business, the definition of a football club’s success is relative and the distinctions between a successful club and an unsuccessful one are often unclear. Most clubs are driven by athletic achievement rather than profit maximization to the shareholder and stakeholder's interests. It is typically assumed that athletic achievements themselves will drive economic sustainability and long-term success, which can be further harnessed for the enhancement of athletic abilities and future successes (Fløtnes, 2011).

In football, like in other markets, one can refer to fans of the clubs as customers. It is crucial for football marketers to understand their customers, i.e. the fans. Part of that understanding is to know how fans behave; to this end, it is essential to study their attitude. While the uniqueness of the market equips these customers with special characteristics, the relevant attitudinal constructs can nevertheless be built just like in other consumer behaviour models: they are divided into behavioural, affective (emotional) and cognitive (knowledge) categories, each containing factors that influence the attitude (Znaniecki & Thomas, 1958).

Three research questions arise from the above:

* What factors impact football fans’ attitudes?
* How do these attitudes affect forms and perceptions of economic dimensions? Specifically, how does this play out on the following three levels:
  + loyalty in the emotional dimension on the lowest level,
  + time spent as engagement on the intermediate level, and
  + money spent on the highest, financial level
* What is the relationship between the emotional connection to the club, the level of fandom and the definition of fandom by the fan, and the fan’s attitude towards violence?

Significance of the Study

Because of the unique characteristics of the football market and its customers, it is necessary to completely understand the construct of fan attitude and the factors influencing it in order to be able to identify the club’s main clients ­­­­­– the fans (Neale, 1964). Football fans as customers are driven by other motives than regular customers in other markets, as is explained in later parts of this dissertation.

To reach this understanding, the dissertation focuses on the attitudes of Israeli football fans. Some key factors that affect the clubs’ economics are examined via an understanding of the fans’ attitudinal construct. In particular, three factors are studied: audience size, the fans’ money and time spending, and their loyalty; additionally, demographic information is analysed. Another important factor that influences fan attitudes and club economics in Israeli football and must be taken into account here is violence in sports. Just like other social factors like, e.g., ethnic or religious identities, the presence of violence is expected to have an effect on the economic aspect of fan attitude; hence the importance of studying this factor.

Most studies about attitude focus on cognitive and affective constructs (Maio & Haddock, 2010), as these have been shown to be good predictors of attitudes (e.g., Chowdhury & Salam, 2017; Perugini, 2005; van Giesen *et al.*, 2015; Trendel and Werle, 2016; Breckler 1984; Breckler & Berman 1991; Breckler & Wiggins, 1989, 1991). Moreover, since "there is abundant evidence that evaluative implications of cognitive, affective, and/or behavioural information are positively correlated" (Maio & Haddock, 2014, p. 37), we can assume that the influence of behaviour on attitude will be similar to that of cognitive and affective factors. In this study, more emphasis was put on understanding cognitive and affective constructs than behavioural ones.

Contribution to Science

This dissertation contributes to consumer behaviour research in the context of marketing, focusing on consumer attitudes and the constructs that inform them.

Some studies claim that the influence of attitudes on behaviour is weak to non-existent, so that attitude cannot predict behaviour (Bainbridge, Frymier & Nadler, 2017). On the other hand, other studies such as Weinstein (1972), Simonson & Maushak (1995), or Glasman & Albarracín (2006) present evidence for such an influence. The latter conducted a quantitative study showing that a more direct experience with the attitude object was correlated with a more reliable prediction of behaviour. On the other hand, in the present study intended behaviour forms part of one of the three constructs that comprise the attitude, so that the influence of the intended behaviour on the attitude of the fan is investigated.

This study aims to establish the influence of selected factors on football fans’ attitudes and the impact of the latter on economic factors that directly affect the club economy. The focus is on four factors: audience size, money and time spending by fans, fan loyalty and violence during matches. Audience size affects the income of the club on every match day in two ways: via the revenue from ticket sales as well as from selling rights to broadcast the match on TV networks. For the purposes of this study, this factor will be measured in terms of self-reported attendance using an online survey. The fan money and time spending factor refers to the fans’ preferences, priorities and spending habits. Like audience size, fan spending will also be measured based on self-reported data rather than economic data from the clubs. Fan loyalty is related to the previous two factors but reflects consistency or changes in attitude over longer period of time. Finally, the violence factor refers to how different types and levels of violence affect fan attitudes. Using these factors, this study proposes a three-level hierarchy of behaviour: first, loyalty in the emotional dimension as the lowest level; second, time spending habits as engagement for the intermediate level; and third, money spending habits on the highest, financial level. Three hypothesis were formulated that helped to compare the impact of attitudes on every level, H2, H2a and H3.

Understanding the studied connections that conform customers' attitudes is essential for marketers, especially in a very complex market like that of Israeli football clubs and fans. The results of this research will help shed some light on a field less covered, and hopefully help get a better understanding on the chain of reactions that can create a strong positive fan attitude, and consequently will lead to the results desired by the clubs.

Research Scope

The subjective scope of the research is fans’ attitudes towards their favourite club and team. Two main types of attitudes were addressed: affective (feelings and emotions) and cognitive (beliefs and knowledge). The third type, behavioural attitudes (how a person behaves), was less emphasised; in examining fans’ spending habits, the focus was on intention rather than the behaviour itself. This approach is based on the idea that while attitude in most cases cannot predict behaviour, there are studies showing that a strong favourable attitude is expected to predict behaviour better than a weak or negative attitude (Park, Macinnis and Priester, 2006). The aim of this study was to reach a better understanding of Israeli football fans’ attitudes, not necessarily of their behaviour; the latter was approached only as one of three attitudinal constructs.

The literature cited in this study pertains to consumer behaviour, the study of attitudes in general and attitude constructs in particular, and approaches to the other factors used in this study, like attendance to sport events, sports fans’ habits, customer and fan loyalty, and violence in sports. All this in addition to reviewing previous research in the field for the purpose of designing and executing of the study itself.

The objective scope comprises Israeli football fans of one of the top five Israeli teams that participate in the top league (Ligat Ha-Al), Maccabi Tel-Aviv FC, Maccabi Haifa FC, Beitar Jerusalem FC, Hapoel Tel-Aviv FC and Ironi Kiryat Shmona FC. These 5 teams were chosen on the basis of having won at least one league championship in the last ten years. 1264 study participants filled out questionnaires and their answers were the basis for the research carried out for this dissertation. The time frame in which the research was conducted was the 2015/2016 season. The data were collected using questionnaires filled in by fans over the internet.

The research was conducted in Israel. One of the most important reasons for conducting the research in Israel was the fact that little research on the subject has been previously carried out in this country. Because of continuing globalization and the transition of football club ownership to wealthy businesspeople and entities, many teams have transitioned from being representatives of their communities to becoming global economic forces (Coakley 1998; Giulianotti & Robertson 2004). This transition makes it more interesting to perform the research in Israel, where football clubs were originally one of the ways to unite and represent the different communities in the country, whereas now the majority of clubs are privately owned.

Limitations of the Study

The survey was conducted during the last part of the 2015/16 season of the Israeli football league. For this reason, developments occurring at the end of this season and in the following season (2016/17) could not be included in this thesis.

The research and its conclusions are relevant to the country of Israel because it was carried out only in the researcher’s home country. Because of the specific characteristics of the country and population, it is problematic to reach conclusions on other countries based on the results obtained. Thus the ideas, results and conclusions are limited to the country of Israel.

The selection of the five teams included in the research was carried out according to two criteria: first, that the team Israeli; second, that the team has won at least one domestic league championship in the last ten years. This limits the conclusions to the fans of more successful teams and excludes less successful and lower-league teams.

The sample was a non-random quota sample. In this type of sampling the population is first segmented into mutually exclusive subgroups – in this case, fans of a specific team. Then judgment was used to select the subjects or units from each segment based on a specified proportion, in this case the number of fans by team. The technique used was to circulate the questionnaires as widely as possible via the internet, and then collect the acceptably answered questionnaires until the quota for each team was met. For that reason not all fans were reached in the same way or at the same time.

Fan behaviour is difficult to research, as the best approach is to use observations of the behaviour itself. But due to the type of research conducted and other data required for the study this was not possible here, so the behaviour was recorded based on fans’ self-reports.

Research Hypotheses and Results

The first hypothesis tested the factors that lead to a person’s becoming a fan, or the attachment process as described by Funk & James (2006), where the relationship of this process to the emotional reactions of the fan is studied. The present study expands on this idea and investigates the attachment process not just as an affective construct, i.e., the emotional factors shaping the attitude, but in terms of the attitude of the fan as a whole, including not just the affective construct but also the cognitive and behavioural constructs. In addition, the author's aim was to understand which factor more strongly influences a fan’s attitude: the (personal? factors leading to becoming a fan, or demographic and socioeconomic factors. The hypothesis formulated for this purpose was:

H1 – The way of becoming a football fan affect the attitude of the fan more than do demographic and socioeconomic factors.

Evaluating first hypothesis (H1) by analysing the three variables measured (age, ways of becoming a fan, and socioeconomic status) against the three constructs, it becomes clear that the variable “ways of becoming a fan” has the strongest influence on the three constructs, more than age or socioeconomic status. According to the results, this variable has the strongest influence on attitude more than the other two. Based on those results, the hypothesis "The way a fan becomes a fan affects the attitude of the fan more than demographic and socioeconomic factors do" has been proven correct.

The analysis and understanding of spending habits is probably one of the most interesting issues for the marketing department of a football club. For this reason, researchers study the difference in the terms of consumers and fans like in Dixon (2013). With the modernization of the markets in general and the football market in particular, social media have become an important tool for marketers. This new communication channel helps marketers not only to advertise and increase sales, but also to strengthen the fans’ connection to the club. Studies like Weaver (2011) or Hird (2010) explore the influence of social media on the fan engagement in terms time spent on club-related activities. Another study researched a more specific aspect, namely the increased time spent by fans on online gaming (Kelly, Lewis and Mortimer, 2012). The present research aimed to study time and money spending habits from a different perspective, exploring the connection between time and money spending factors and the attitude of the fan. For this purpose the following hypothesis was designed:

H2 – There is a connection between the attitude of the fan and his habits of spending time and money on team-related items/activities.

The second hypothesis (H2) checked the influence the different attitude constructs have on money and time spending habits. When comparing money spending habits to time spending habits, one can see that the connection between time spending habits and fan attitude is stronger than the connection between the latter and money spending habits. Moreover, the results show that the stronger the attitude is, the more money and time the fan will spend on team-related items/activities. The research also demonstrates that the behavioural construct has more influence on the attitude (?) than the cognitive and affective constructs. Yet another conclusion is that violence and a low-quality football match will not stop fans with a strong attitude from going to matches.

When analysing the existing research concerning the attendance factor, or audience, as it is referred to in many articles, the main issues addressed appear to be the types of audience involvement (Morley, 1980), levels of demand and how it relates to customer satisfaction and profitability (Borland & MacDonald 2003; Dietschy 2013a; Greenwell 2001), and the effect of globalization of football from the attendance point of view (Giulianotti and Robertson, 2004). In this study the author investigated the attendance factor from a different point of view, namely in terms of its relationship to the attitude factor. This is because the purpose of this research centres on the attitude of the fans, and the idea that attendance can have an influence on (or correlation with?) the attitude. This connection was tested with the following hypothesis:

H2a – A stronger positive attitude towards the team leads to higher match attendance.

Three variables (cognitive, affective and behavioural constructs) were correlated to attendance in hypothesis (H2a). The author reached the conclusion that the behavioural construct had a stronger influence on attendance than the cognitive and affective constructs. The fans with a stronger attitude will continue to buy tickets and attend matches even in the presence of violence. In conclusion, a stronger positive attitude towards the team will lead to higher attendance, to fans buying more individual tickets during a season, and the presence of what fans consider violence will not stop them from attending matches. Hence this hypothesis has been confirmed.

In the previous hypothesis the connection between spending habits and attitude was tested. Following that, a more specific connection was researched: the spending habit factor was tested against the loyalty factor. Loyalty has been approached by researchers from various points of view. Forms of loyalty were researched as a basis for understanding the term, e.g., in Neal (2000) or Biscaia et al. (2013). Some studies researched the connection between fan loyalty and attitude (Funk & James 2001; Richardson & Dwyer 2003), while others followed a more marketing-oriented approach, e.g., Brandes et al. (2013), which deals with market potential including loyalty as one of the factors. Another example is a study that tested the connection between loyalty and product satisfaction (Tapp, 2004). Since there is clearly an important place for the loyalty factor in marketing-oriented research, in this thesis the connection of fan loyalty to spending habits was tested using the next hypothesis:

H3 – The higher the level of fan loyalty to the club, more fans will spend on team-related items/activities.

This hypothesis (H3) dealt with the loyalty of the fans. Based on the results and conclusions presented, the hypothesis “The higher the level of fan loyalty to the club, more he will spend on team-related items/activities” was confirmed. Three variables were used to represent the level of loyalty of the fan: duration (in years) of being a fan, intensity of fandom and changes in fandom; their analysis shows that, e.g., a fan who defines the team as “his life” spends more money on team-related items/activities than other fans, so that the meaning that being a fan has for someone the spending. Another example is that the higher the level of fandom is, the more tickets for individual matches the fan will buy. Yet another example is that the lower level of loyalty of the fan is, less he buys tickets for matches. Based on these results, a more loyal fan will spend more on team-related items/activities.

Beside the confirming the hypothesis directly, additional other insights were reached. Like in the previous hypothesis, also here the results make clear that the behaviour construct influences the attitude more than the affective and cognitive constructs do. Another interesting result is that a more veteran a fan is, the less he is affected by lack of public transport and the more by lack of parking spaces at the stadium and the presence of violence. Surprisingly, these results support the claim that violence deters fans with a lower level of fandom less.

When talking about Israeli football and its fans, one of the issues that arise is the presence of violence. That is why the author decided to include violence as a factor in this research. In literature contains many studies on the basis for the violence in sports, both in terms of its origins (Sorek, 2007) and history (Elias 1971; 1976). Other studies expanded the research into the forms of violence in sports (Bourdieu, 1980) or Fields et al. 2007). Guilbert (2004) investigates not only forms of violence but also its levels in different sports. Hence this factor has been researched from different angles, as shown by (Spaaij, 2014), there is no single factor determining the presence or forms of violence; many factors were investigated. In the present study the author chose to study the influence of the three factors central to this thesis on the presence of football violence and to provide an additional point of view. The hypothesis used for this purpose was:

H4 – The level of violence experienced or witnessed is influenced by the fan’s emotional connection to the club, the level of fandom and the definition of fandom by the fan.

The last hypothesis (H4) was confirmed by the results; the three factors used, being the level of fandom, the definition of fandom and the affective connection of the fan to the club are in fact connected to the violence experienced or witnessed by the club. Moreover, the results show an influence of each of the three factors on the violence factor. More specifically, when the level of fandom is weaker, the exposure to violence is higher. The definition of fandom also presents an influence on the violence factor, and last the affective connection shows an influence on violence factor. Out of all the types of violence investigated, only three turned out to be significant in relation to the aforementioned factors: "Participation in a fight between fan groups inside the stadium", "Participation in a fight between fan groups outside the stadium" and "Lighting flares in the stands". This can lead to the conclusion that these three types of violence are considered more severe than others by the fans.

Selected Conclusions

Several noteworthy conclusions were drawn. Consistently across all results, regardless the of the variable investigated, the behavioural construct exerted more influence than the cognitive and affective constructs; e.g., one result shows that the behavioural construct has a stronger influence on attendance than the cognitive and affective constructs. The comparison of factors that influence fan attitudes shows that the way of becoming a fan had a stronger influence than age or socioeconomic status. As expected, the results also show that a stronger positive attitude leads to more money and time spent on team-related items/activities. Two related findings were made here: first, that the connection between time spending habits and fan attitude is stronger than that between the latter and money spending habits. Second, that a more loyal fan will spend more on team-related items/activities. A more surprising result was that violence affects fans with a lower level of fandom less; the author would expect that a fan with a strong positive attitude would be less affected by violence because he is more used to it. Another result shows that the presence of violence and a low-quality football match would not stop fans with a strong attitude from going to matches. It was expected that these two different factors would not affect fans with a strong attitude, but this maybe shows the uniqueness of this market where the product, the football match, is of low quality and yet the customer, the fan, continues to consume. Finally, the last part of the research, comprising the analysis of various regression models, shows that the behavioural factor is a strong predictor of the fans’ time and money spending.

A number of ideas for marketers in the football market can be drawn from the the results obtained in this study. It is recommended that marketers emphasize their efforts in maintaining the level of fandom of older fans by enhancing their attitude constructs. It seems even more important to create a strong positive attitude at a young age, more specifically to create a connection to the club via fathers and brothers. Another recommended way is generating opportunities for young people to be a part of the club by playing in it, as this will create a connection to the team and club that lasts until later on in life. In addition is recommended for the clubs to focus their marketing efforts on the behavioural construct, as in this way they target the fan in a more efficient way. So when approaching the fan from a cognitive or affective point of view, e.g., through advertising, they should try to influence him via the behavioural construct, e.g. leading him to take part in club activities.. Moreover, to overcome violence as a deterring factor, the club should strengthen the fans’ attitude so that they continue to attend despite its presence.

This thesis researched a part of the football market in a specific country, and the research can be further developed into different directions. One direction could be combining the marketing perspective with the sociological one and investigating fan attitudes through a combination of both perspectives. Another direction could be to try to reach a formula quantifying each construct; the formula for the attitude would include the various factors influencing it. A final suggestion is to investigate ways to eradicate or minimize violence in football by using fan attitude as an element for achieving this goal.

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