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**Attitudinal constructs of football fans**

**and the relation to the football market**

Summary

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Statement of the Research Problem

Unlike in the case of conventional business, the definition of a football club’s success is relative and the boundaries between a successful vs. unsuccessful club are often unclear. Most clubs are driven by athletic achievement rather than profit maximization in the shareholders’ and stakeholders’ interest. It is typically assumed that athletic achievements themselves will drive economic sustainability and long-term success, which can then be further harnessed for the enhancement of athletic abilities and future successes (Fløtnes, 2011).

In football, like in other markets, one can refer to the fans of 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 this market means its customers have 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), 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 the forms and perceptions of economic dimensions on the following three levels:
  + loyalty as the emotional dimension on the lowest level,
  + time spending habits as engagement on the intermediate level, and
  + money spending habits on the highest level, financial dimension?
* What is the relationship between the emotional connection attachment to the club, the level of fanhood and the definition of fanhood 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 constructs. In particular, three factors are studied: audience size, the fans’ money and time spending habits, and their loyalty; additionally, demographic information is analysed. Another important factor that influences fan attitudes and club economics in Israeli football which must be taken into account here is violence in sports. Just like other social factors, 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 reliable predictors of attitudes (e.g., Chowdhury & Salam, 2017; Perugini, 2005; van Giesen *et al.*, 2015; Trendel & 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 behavioural factors generally influence attitude in the same direction as cognitive and affective factors do. In this study, more emphasis was put on understanding cognitive and affective constructs than behaviour one.

Contribution to Science

This dissertation contributes to consumer behaviour research in the context of marketing, focusing on consumer attitudes and the constructs that conform 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 is correlated with higher predictability of behaviour. On the other hand, in the present study the intended behaviour forms part of one of the three constructs that comprise the attitude; thus the behaviour-attitude relationship was investigated in the reverse direction, as the influence of the intended behaviour on the attitude of the fan.

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 habits by the fans, fan loyalty and violence. 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 was measured in terms of self-reported attendance using an online survey. The money and time spending habits factor refers to the fans’ preferences, priorities and spending habits. Like audience size, fan spending was measured via self-reports 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 behaviours that may be impacted by attitude: first, loyalty in the emotional dimension as the lowest level; second, time spending habits as engagement on the intermediate level; and third, money spending habits on the highest, financial level. Three hypotheses were formulated to help analyse the impact of attitude on the three levels: H2, H2a and H3.

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

Scope of the Study

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

This study was designed and carried out based on a review of relevant literature on consumer behaviour, the study of attitudes in general and attitudinal constructs in particular, and approaches to the specific factors investigated in this study, like attendance at sport events, sports fans’ habits, customer and fan loyalty, and violence in sports.

The objective scope comprises Israeli fans of the leading five Israeli football teams playing 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 teams were selected based on having won at least one league championship in the last ten years. Internet questionnaires were filled out by 1264 study participants (fans) whose answers provide the data for this study. The research was conducted during the 2015/2016 season in Israel.

An important reason for conducting the study in Israel was the fact that little research on the subject has been previously carried out in this country. Continuing globalization and the transition of football club ownership to wealthy businesspeople and entities has led many teams from being representatives of their communities to becoming global economic forces (Coakley 1998; Giulianotti & Robertson 2004). This transition process makes it more interesting to perform the research in Israel, where football clubs were originally one of the ways to unite and represent the country’s various communities, whereas at present the majority of clubs are privately owned.

Limitations of the Study

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

The hypotheses results and conclusions presented here are relevant only to the country of Israel, where the research was carried out. Due to the specific characteristics of the country and population, it is problematic to extrapolate results to other countries.

The five teams included in the research were selected according to two criteria: first, all teams had to be Israeli; second, each team had to have 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.

Quota sampling was used as a non-random sampling technique in which the population is first segmented into mutually exclusive subgroups – in this case, fans of one specific team; then judgment is applied to select the subjects or units from each segment based on a specified proportion – in this case, the number of fans per team. The method used was to circulate the questionnaires as widely as possible via the internet, collecting valid responses until the quota for each team was met. Thus not all fans were reached in the same way or at the same time.

Fan behaviour is difficult to study as the optimal approach to studying behaviour is to observe it directly. However, due to the type of study conducted and the other data required, this was not possible here; hence the behaviour was recorded based on self-reports.

Hypotheses and Results

The first hypothesis investigated the factors that lead to a person’s becoming a fan, or the attachment process as described in 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 by investigating the attachment process not just as an affective construct, i.e., as emotional factors shaping the attitude, but in terms of the attitude of the fan as a whole, including the cognitive and behavioural constructs. An additional aim was to understand which factor influences a fan’s attitude more – the experiences leading to becoming a fan, or demographic and socioeconomic factors. The hypothesis formulated for this purpose was:

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

When evaluating the first hypothesis (H1) by analysing the three variables measured (age, ways of becoming a fan, socioeconomic status) against the three constructs, the results show that the variable “ways of becoming a fan” exerts the strongest influence on all three constructs. Based on these results, the hypothesis "The ways of becoming a football fan affect the attitude of the fan more than demographic and socioeconomic factors do" has been confirmed.

The analysis of spending habits is probably among the topics most interesting to the marketing department of a football club, which is why researchers like Dixon (2013) study the difference between the terms “consumer” and “fan”. With the modernization of 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 advertise and increase sales, but also strengthen the fans’ attachment to the club. Studies like Weaver (2011) or Hird (2010) explore the influence of social media on fan engagement in terms of time spent on club-related activities. E.g., Kelly, Lewis & Mortimer (2012) researched specifically the increased time spent by fans on online gaming. This study aims to approach time and money spending habits from a different perspective, exploring their relationship to fan attitude. To this end the following hypothesis was formulated:

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

The second hypothesis (H2) investigates the influence of the different attitude constructs on money and time spending habits. Analysis shows that the correlation between time spending habits and fan attitude is stronger than that between the latter and money spending habits. Moreover, the results show that the stronger the positive attitude is, the more money and time the fan spends on team-related items/activities; further, that the behavioural construct has more influence on the attitude than the cognitive and affective constructs do. Yet another result is that a poor-quality football match and the presence of violence do not stop fans with a strong positive attitude from attending matches.

When analysing the existing research concerning the attendance factor (referred to as audience in many articles), the main questions addressed appear to be the types of audience involvement (Morley, 1980), demand levels and how they relate to customer satisfaction and profitability (Borland & MacDonald 2003; Dietschy 2013a; Greenwell 2001), and the effect of football globalization on attendance (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2004). Since the aim here is to understand fan attitude, this study investigates the attendance factor in terms of its relationship to the attitude factor and the idea that attendance can be influenced by or correlated with the attitude. This correlation 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 tested for their correlation with attendance in hypothesis (H2a). This analysis again found that the behavioural construct has a stronger influence on attendance than the cognitive and affective constructs do. Fans with a stronger positive attitude continue buying tickets and attending matches even in the presence of violence. In conclusion, a stronger positive attitude towards the team leads to higher attendance, to fans buying more individual tickets during a season, and to the presence violence (as defined by the fans) not stopping them from attending matches. Hence this hypothesis has been confirmed.

Previous hypothesis (H2) tested the correlation between spending habits and attitude. Next, a more specific correlation was studied: the spending habit factor was tested against the loyalty factor. Loyalty has been approached by researchers from many points of view; its various forms were researched as a basis for understanding the term, e.g., by Neal (2000) or Biscaia *et al.* (2013). Some studies investigated the relationship 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 studies market potential including loyalty as one of the factors. Tapp (2004) researched the relationship between loyalty and product satisfaction. Since there is clearly an important place for the loyalty factor in marketing-oriented research, this study tested the relationship between fan loyalty and spending habits using the next hypothesis:

H3 – The higher a fan’s level of loyalty to the club, the more he or she will spend on team-related items/activities.

Based on the results obtained, the hypothesis (H3) “The higher the level of a fan’s loyalty to the club, the more will spend on team-related items/activities” was confirmed. Three variables were used to represent the level of fan loyalty: the years of fanhood, its level, and changes in fan status; their analysis shows that, e.g., a fan who describes the team as “his life” spends more money on team-related items/activities than other fans, so that the meaning that fanhood has for the fan affects his spending. Another example is that the higher the level of fanhood is, the more tickets for individual matches the fan will buy, and vice versa. These results show that a more loyal fan will spend more on team-related items/activities.

In addition to confirming the hypothesis, other insights were gained. Like in the previous hypotheses, also here the results make clear that the behavioural construct influences the attitude more than the affective and cognitive constructs do. Another interesting result is that the longer someone has been a fan, the less his attendance is hindered by lack of public transportation and the more it suffers from lack of parking spaces at the stadium and the presence of violence. Surprisingly, these results support the claim that violence deters fans at a lower level of fanhood less.

When discussing Israeli football and its fans, an issue surfacing frequently is the presence of violence; so it seemed important to include it in this study as a factor. The literature features many studies on the roots of violence in sports, both in terms of its origins (Sorek, 2007) and history (Elias 1971; 1976); other studies focus on its specific forms (Bourdieu, 1980; Fields *et al.*, 2007). Guilbert (2004) investigates not only forms of violence but also its levels in different sports. Thus violence in sports has been researched from various angles and, as shown by (Spaaij, 2014), there is no single factor determining its presence or forms; many factors are being researched. The present author chose to study the influence of three factors investigated throughout the dissertation on the presence of football violence 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 attachment to the club, the level of fanhood and the definition of fanhood by the fan.

The last hypothesis (H4) was confirmed in the results; the three factors used, i.e., the level of fanhood, the definition of fanhood and the affective connection to the club are in fact correlated with the violence experienced or witnessed by the fan. Moreover, the results show an influence of each of the three factors on the violence factor. Specifically, when the level of fanhood is lower, the exposure to violence is higher. Out of 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 may lead to the conclusion that these three types of violence are regarded by fans as more severe than others.

Selected Conclusions

Several noteworthy conclusions were drawn. Consistently across all results, regardless 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 do. The comparison of factors that influence fan attitude shows that the way of becoming a fan had a stronger influence than age or socioeconomic status. As expected, the results also demonstrate that a stronger positive attitude leads to more money and time spent on team-related items/activities. Two related findings were made here: first, the correlation between time spending habits and fan attitude is stronger than that between the latter and money spending habits. Second, a more loyal fan will spend more on team-related items/activities. A more surprising result was that violence affects fans with at a lower level of fanhood 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 finding is that the presence of violence and a poor-quality football match do not stop fans with a strong positive attitude from going to matches. While it was expected that these two factors would not affect this segment of fans, this result perhaps demonstrates the uniqueness of this market where the product – the football match – is of low quality and yet the customer – the fan – continues to consume. The final part of the research, comprising the analysis of various regression models, shows that the behavioural construct is a strong predictor of the fans’ time and money spending habits.

A number of recommendations for football marketers can be suggested based on the results obtained in this study. It is recommended that marketers focus their efforts on maintaining the level of older fans’ fanhood by enhancing their attitude constructs. It seems even more important to encourage a strong positive attitude at a young age; specifically, to create an attachment to the club via fathers and brothers. Another recommended method is providing opportunities for young people to be part of the club by playing in it, as this will create a long-lasting attachment to the team and club. It also appears strategic for the clubs to focus their marketing efforts on the behavioural construct to target the fans in a more efficient way. So rather than approaching the fan from a cognitive or affective point of view, e.g., through advertising, they could try to influence him via the behavioural construct, e.g. leading him to take part in club activities. Moreover, to overcome the deterring effect of violence, the club could strengthen the fans’ attitude so that they continue to attend nevertheless.

While this dissertation focussed on one part of the football market in Israel, this research can be further developed in several directions. One direction could be combining the marketing perspective with the sociological one to investigate fan attitudes. Another direction could be developing formulas for quantifying each of the three constructs discussed here; 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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