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**SPORTS FANS AS CUSTOMERS AND MEASUREMENT OF THEIR ATTITUDES**

**Summary:** The goal of this conceptual paper is to review previous studies that measure the attitudes of sport fans in different ways, to describe the similarities and differences between these studies and to use them as a basis for a new model. The proposed model will include different variables such as loyalty, attendance and the origins of fanhood. The author's suggestion for measuring the attitudes of sports fans is to measure the attitude of the fan using three constructs: emotional, cognitive and behavioral, and combine them with other variables such as spending habits, loyalty and attendance motivation. All these will enable clubs and researchers to gain a better understanding and knowledge of how to measure the behavior of sports fans, who are also customers.

**Keywords:** Sports Economics, Customer Behavior, Marketing, Measurement Model, Attitudes.

**JEL Classification:** M31, Z29

**Introduction**

In football, as in other markets, we can refer to the fans of clubs as customers. It is essential in football marketing to understand the customers, i.e. the fans, and their attitudes, which have an influence on their behavior and vice versa. This connection exists, but appears to be weak as presented by LaPiere (1934). However, because of the uniqueness of this market, these customers also have special characteristics. Nevertheless, the attitude constructs are the same as in consumer behavior models, and are divided into behavioral, affective (emotional) and cognitive (knowledge) constructs. Under each of these constructs there are variables that influence attitudes (Maio & Haddock 2010).

This paper employs a classical conceptual approach to examine the models used in this field and to describe the similarities and differences in the approaches to studying sports fans, as well as measuring and explaining their attitudes. The proposed model is based on the literature review conducted for this article, thus the results and conclusions are confined to the limited number of literature sources used.

**Customer Behavior Defined**

Consumer behavior is a subject analyzed in the field of economics. It is crucial for marketers to understand their clients and their behavior in order to know how they can advertise, promote and sell a product efficiently. The clients are the customers of the product or service. Many times in the literature a distinction is made between the definitions of the terms consumers and customers. *"The term “customer” is typically used to refer to someone who regularly purchases from a particular store or company. The term “consumer” more generally refers to anyone engaging in any of the activities used in our definition of consumer behavior. Therefore, a customer is defined in terms of a specific firm while a consumer is not."* (Bello 2008, 2). In other words *"consumers use products while customers buy them. A consumer may also be a customer and a customer can also be a consumer, but situations occur where this is not the case."* (Joseph 2015) For the purpose of this paper, no clear distinction will be made, so both terms will be used interchangeably. In both cases this will refer to the client, more specifically to the fans of a football club.

Consumer behavior includes mental activity, emotional and physical factors and the motives that drive people during the selection, purchase, usage and disposal of products and services that satisfy their needs and desires (Burridge & Connell 1983). With this understanding of consumer behavior the marketer can begin designing the product strategy. Three main steps should be taken: market segmentation, product positioning and marketing mix. To successfully conduct these steps it is necessary to completely understand all the elements of consumer behavior.

**Unique Characteristics of Sports Fans**

In general, sports fans are for the sport industry like any other customer in any other market. But in the literature it is possible to find research which shows that sports fans have some characteristics that differentiate them from customers in general. According to Wann et al. (2001), involvement in sports as a fan is male-dominated, but there is evidence of an increase in the number of women.

Different emotions affect customers of all kinds but for sports fans, just watching sporting events can affect their emotions (Sloan 1979). These emotions can be triggered and thrown off balance just because of the outcome of a match involving their favorite team, and real emotional pain may appear after the loss of a match by the fan's team (Eisler 1997).

Intolerance of less committed fans to the cause is a common phenomenon (Fiske 1989, 1992); such ordinary supporters (less committed ones) are seen and treated as intruders (Redden & Steiner 2000). Continuing this aspect of intolerance, Taylor (1991) discovered that intolerant fans tend to surround themselves with experiences, opinions and people they can tolerate. Therefore, their friends tend to share the same interest in sports and support the same team (Wann & Branscombe 1993; Smith et al. 1981).

One of the ways sports fans stay connected to their team is by collecting emblems as homage to that team (Bromberger et al. 1993), or as Fiske (1992) described it, ‘capital collecting’. This behavior befits and promotes their fanatical context. All this can be summarized as the *"tendency to collect various team and match related memorabilia"* (Johnston 2009, 15).

Much stimulation can be generated by a fan at a sporting event, bringing the spectator to a state of significant arousal and leading to increased heart rate (Corbin 1973). This arousal often affects fans' behavior, sometimes in a positive way with cheering, waving, yelling and also through songs, chants, drums flares and banners (Bromberger et al. 1993). At other times this arousal can lead to violent behavior just through being a part of a crowd (Sloan 1979).

One more characteristic that is probably unique to the sport industry is the element of racism. Clubs often utilize their influence on supporters to promote racist views; this is an ugly element that has at times plagued various professional clubs (Johnston 2009).

**Approaches to Research into Customer Behavior**

The research model used for studying consumer behavior will depend on the knowledge and understandings the researcher is looking for. Basically, there are two approaches – the positivist and the interpretive.

Positivist research deals with observable phenomena. Its purpose is to gather data and formulate general rules that will allow us to explain the connection between these phenomena and to predict their occurrence. Two key features characterizing this approach are: (1) objectivity –no dependence between the investigative process and its conclusions and accidental circumstances and (2) empiricism –the study is based on data obtained experimentally or observationally (Marsden & Littler 1999).

The interpretive approach seeks to understand human behavior through its inherent meaning. The clearest characterization of a person is that he is striving to give meaning to his life and his relationship with the environment. This approach aims to understand the relationships between internal phenomena by exposing their common meanings (Holbrook & O’Shaughnessy 1988).

**Sociologically-Oriented Studies**

Customer behavior is usually related to areas of business management such as marketing but even so, *“several authors have investigated theories of sports fan behavior and/or developed instruments to measure aspects of fan participation”* (Capella 2002, 2)from the sociological perspective. Some researchers study the involvement of sports fans to explain their behavior as customers and the role of sports fans.

Sports fan role research, such as that conducted by Sloan (1979) or Wann et al. (1999), includes the study of elements such as *“increase in self-worth, escape from work and tedious aspects of life, excitement, entertainment, a sense of achievement, positive stress, group membership, and socialization”* (Capella 2002, 1). In addition to studies that focus on the sociological and social motives for being a sports fan, other researchers such as Wann & Branscombe (1993) take a general approach to studying spectator violence. Other, more specific investigations search for the reasons for sports fan violence and aggressive behavior that occurs while watching sporting events (Smith et al. 1981).

Many researchers, such as Fisher & Wakefield (1998), Wann & Branscombe (1993), Wann & Dolan (1994) and Wann et al. (1996) have tested *“the degree of identification sports fans have with their teams”* (Johnston 2009, 32). From a different angle, Smith et al. (1981) argue that being a sports fan works as a *“pacifier for people who would otherwise be bored and unhappy with their lives”* (Capella 2002).

**Marketing-Oriented Studies**

"*Academic interest in the economics of professional team sports dates back as far as the mid-1950s. Since then, many books and journal articles have been written on the subject*" (Dobson & Goddard 2004). Two of the first articles that are considered fundamental in the development of the field of team sports economics research are those of Rottenberg (1956) and Neale (1964). Rottenberg (1956) presented and analyzed "*a number of market problems which are interesting because of some unusual characteristics of the baseball labor market and the organization of the baseball industry*" (Rottenberg, 1956, 242). He supplemented that with secondary research of a quantitative nature, through an empirical analysis of existing data regarding attendance and player salaries, then compared the data between different leagues.

In contrast, Neale (1964) compared the professional sports industry with a regular business in another market. Through this comparison he presented the unique economic characteristics of professional sports entities as businesses. The comparison was made qualitatively using existing data by examining different variables such as the league standing's effect on gate receipts and advertising. Thus his study presents the problems of referring to a professional sports entity as a business.

**Known Measurement Models**

The fan behavior construct of attitude has been measured by instruments that mainly examine aspects of fan participation and involvement. Participation has been studied in different ways, as summarized in Table 1. Dietz-Uhler & Murrell (1999) examined the relationship between game outcomes and fan reactions during the course of one season. Data were collected from 74 participants (students from an introductory social psychology class) during a 14-week university football season. Based on social identity theory perceptions of the team after each match, three aspects were tested – expectations, outcome and media attention. The students completed an initial Collective Self-Esteem Scale, a 16-item questionnaire which, using a 7-point scale, measured the extent of one's identification with a group by evaluating the team according to four variables: goodness, successfulness, intelligence, and skillfulness. Then after each football game they were asked to fill in a questionnaire about their reactions to the match. The variables the author used to evaluate levels of identification were outcome (win or loss), expected outcome (favorite to win or underdog) and media attention (positive or negative).

Similarly, Eisler (1997) *“presented a picture of the sports fan whose emotional balance hangs on his team's performance, with losses being devastating and causing real emotional pain”* (Johnston 2009, 14). Eisler performed a series of in-depth interviews with both male and female fans of different teams competing in the NCAA basketball tournament, to understand the levels of emotional pain endured by fans when their favorite team loses. He focused on mood swings, origins of pain and reactions to outcomes.

Fisher & Wakefield (1998) studied the involvement of sports fans by studying the factors that lead to identification and group supportive behavior, even of unsuccessful teams. They conducted a two-group field study with 250 respondents to a one-page survey. Attitude measurement was performed according to a 7-point scale, where 1 meant strongly disagree and 7 strongly agree. Group identification (fan's relationship with the sports team) and domain involvement (relationship with the sport itself) were measured with five items each. Perceived group performance (fan's belief in his team being ranked highly) and group member attractiveness (the perception of a team's players' desired qualities) were measured with four items each. Group supportive behavior was also evaluated, according to three types of behavior: game attendance, game behaviors and the purchase of licensed products (Fisher & Wakefield 1998, 31).

Wann & Branscombe (1993) conducted two studies to measure identification with a sports team through several reactions. The authors examined identification levels (strong, moderate or low) among 546 undergraduates by evaluating several behavioral, affective and cognitive reactions of the sports spectators, according to a new scale. The first study was based on a sample of 188 participants who completed a 7-item questionnaire with a Likert scale format designed to measure how strongly they identify with their university basketball team. To this an additional random sample of 49 participants was asked to fill in the same questionnaire one year later to test the instrument's reliability. The second study measured identification using the same questionnaire from the first study, in addition to a questionnaire designed to assess participants' reactions and behavior toward the university team. A total of 358 students took part in this study, which examined four variables including involvement (3 items), attribution (3 items), investment (6 items) and fan uniqueness (4 items).

Laverie & Arnett (2000) developed a model of fan behavior based on two variables, attendance at a sporting event and fan identity salience. They tested the model with a sample of 190 college students, fans of women's basketball at a large university. The data collected included multiple items of a self-reporting nature as well as existing inventories of items from previous studies. Situational involvement was measured with 16 semantic differential items on a 7-point scale, enduring involvement with 9 semantic differential items on a 7-point scale, attachment on a 9-item scale, identity salience with 4 items on a 7-point Likert scale, satisfaction with 3 items also on a 7-point Likert scale and frequency of attendance during the past season on a 7-point scale.

Shank & Beasley (1998) suggest a scale for measuring sports fan involvement constructs to better understand sports fans. By conducting a survey on a sample of 136 consumers they identified two aspects of involvement - cognitive and affective. The two were related to viewing sports on television, reading about sports in magazines and newspapers, attending sporting events and participating in sports. The questionnaire was built around 8 items regarding sports involvement, and 5 items for media habits, attendance and participation in sports. In addition, six in-depth interviews were conducted for the purpose of better understanding the involvement construct and to develop the survey instrument.

A different way of measuring sports fan behavior was employed by Wann et al. (1999), with a questionnaire that assessed the motivation of a fan and the motives for becoming one, analyzing the data according to the sport fan motivational scale (SFMS). Three studies were conducted to expand on previous research conducted by the same author a few years earlier. The first study was designed to test the factor structure of the sports fan motivational scale and its integrity, which was done via a phone survey of 96 random participants who first answered a series of demographic questions and then, in order to test the SFMS, were asked to answer a 23-item questionnaire with a Likert scale format that examined the following variables: escape (3 items), economics (3 items), eustress (3 items), aesthetics (3 items), self-esteem (3 items), group affiliation (3 items), entertainment (3 items) and family (2 items). The second study examined the relationship between preferences for a specific type of sport and the scores reported on the SFMS subscales. This study was conducted on 86 psychology students, and similarly to the first study this one also had two parts. In the first part the participants completed a demographic questionnaire and were asked to list the sports that they most enjoyed watching. In the second part they completed the SFMS questionnaire. Finally, the third study investigated *"the hypothesis that individuals with intrinsic athletic motivation tend to be intrinsically motivated as fans, while persons with extrinsic athletic motivation tend to be extrinsically motivated as fans"* (Wann et al. 1999, 1). This last study was similar to the previous two: 115 psychology students participated by answering demographic questions and completing the SFMS. Then they were asked to fill in the Sport Motivational Scale, which is a 28-item scale design to measure intrinsic and extrinsic athlete motivation.

**Table 1. Summary of the models described in previous studies.**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Author (year)** | **Topic** | **Method** | **Questionnaire type** | **Variables** |
| Dietz-Uhler & Murrell (1999) | Relationship between game outcomes and fan reactions | Quantitative | Face-to-face questionnaire | Goodness  Successfulness  Intelligence  Skillfulness  Outcome  Expected outcome  Media attention |
| Eisler (1997) | Levels of emotional pain endured by fans when their favorite team loses | Qualitative | In-depth interviews | Mood swings  Pain origin  Reactions to outcome |
| Fisher & Wakefield (1998) | Involvement in sports by understanding factors that lead to identification and group supportive behavior | Quantitative | One-page survey | Group identification  Domain involvement Perceived group performance  Group member attractiveness  Group supportive behaviors |
| Wann & Branscombe (1993) | Identification with a sports team | Quantitative | Two studies with short questionnaires | Identification  Involvement  Attribution  Investment  Fan uniqueness |
| Laverie & Arnett (2000) | Model of fan behavior development | Quantitative | About 33-question survey | Situational involvement  Enduring involvement  Attachment  Identity salience  Satisfaction  Attendance |
| Shank & Beasley (1998) | Understanding the involvement construct | Qualitative | Questionnaire and in-depth interviews | Involvement  Media habits  Attendance  Participation in sports |
| Wann et al. (1999) | Motivation of a fan and the motives to become one | Quantitative | Three studies, the first two used a 23-question survey and the third used a 28-question survey. | Escape  Economics  Eustress  Aesthetics  Self-esteem  Group affiliation  Entertainment  Family  Intrinsic athlete motivation  Extrinsic athlete motivation |

The literature thus presents two main ways of measuring sports fan behavior. The first is through the involvement variable and its different definitions. For example, Shank & Beasley (1998) define the term as *“the perceived interest in and personal importance of sports to an individual”* and Bahk (2000) as *“the significance of sport spectating for the fan in everyday life.”* (Johnston 2009, 32). Laverie & Arnett (2000) define involvement as *“a state of motivation, arousal, or interest toward an activity or product, in addition to the constructs of social identity theory, attachment and satisfaction”* (Capella 2002, 2). The second model used by researchers relies heavily on attendance data to measure supporter loyalty in order to achieve a better understanding of their behavior (Mahony et al. 2000).

**Proposed Measurement Model**

Previous studies have presented a number of models for measuring the attitudes of sports fans. In this section I will propose a new approach for measuring the attitudes of those fans. Basically, this model is a combination of previous ones, designed to facilitate attainment of a more accurate and deeper understanding of fans' attitudes, based on measurements that present a clearer and more realistic picture.

Attitudes are confirmed by content, structure and function: "*content can include cognitive, affective, and behavioral information about an object; structure refers to how this information is organized along dimensions within attitudes; and function encompasses diverse psychological needs served by attitudes (e.g., self-esteem, utility enhancement)*" (Maio & Haddock, 2014, 13). This is presented in Maio & Haddock's (2014) book with the metaphor of the “three witches” meaning that these three components "*operate more effectively together than in isolation, in the same way that three witches in folklore make a better brew together than separately*" (Maio & Haddock, 2014, 13).

Models for measuring the attitudes of sports fans usually focus on content, as can be seen in the literature, mainly measuring the cognitive and affective constructs. Attitude constructs of sports fans are not very different from the attitude constructs of any customer in any other market. There are two main approaches: the first is one-dimensional and claims that a fan of a team has only positive beliefs, feelings and behaviors about a specific team and no negative ones about the same team. The other approach is multidimensional, and suggests that the construct components (cognitive, affective and behavioral) are organized in separate dimensions simultaneously, allowing some positive elements and some negative elements (Cacioppo et al. 1997).

My suggestion for measuring attitudes of sports fans is based on the second approach, where each construct is tested separately to determine its level and direction, and then the results are combined to achieve a clearer and more accurate understanding. A set of variables needs to be determined for measuring each construct, thus the constructs are not analyzed as decomposed variables, but the variables that help measure the construct may be analyzed as decomposed variables. I suggest some fundamental variables, each of which will focus upon and help to measure a different construct.

For example, the loyalty variable that examines commitment can be placed under the affective (emotional) construct; identification and violent tendencies can also reflect affective inclinations and can be used to measure this construct. The cognitive construct can be evaluated by money and time spending habits or the level of involvement with team related matters. Behavior can also be measured by these variables, depending on the type of questions posed. For example, if we want to examine the attendance of fans at a sporting event, we can do it objectively, by taking the official data from the club or league and thus obtaining a measure of behavior, or subjectively, by asking the fans directly, which will provide an emotional or cognitive measurement, all depending on the type of questions asked. Therefore, since attendance can be used to measure more than one construct, other variables should also be used to measure each construct separately.

**Chart 1. Order of the proposed model.**

Field of study:

Business management

Department:

Marketing

Area:

Customer behavior

Topic:

Attitudes

Focus:

Attitudes of sports fans

Constructs:

Emotional, Cognitive, Behavioral

Variables: Loyalty, Attendance, Origin of fanhood, Spending habits

To summarize, attitudes of sports fans can be measured by three constructs: cognitive, affective (emotional) and behavioral, where each construct is evaluated by different variables. The combined data should produce a clearer image of the attitudes of sports fans. I propose to conduct an anonymous survey with a questionnaire of approximately 10 to 15 questions in addition to a part comprising 5 to 10 demographic questions. Each construct should be measured by 3 or 4 items; other items should be added to measure different variables such as attendance, loyalty and spending habits. Each author may develop and adapt the questionnaire, according to the specific study and its research purpose.

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