

Sport Identity and Motives of North American Football Supporters

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50-minute poster presentation

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INTRODUCTION

Sport identity is formed from a comparison between a supporter's self-concept and their perception of the sport and its attributes (Brooks, 1998). In other words, supporters would see themselves as being a spectator, sport fan(atic) or member depending on the degree to which their self-concept aligns with a specific product. For example, a supporter of the local basketball team would consider him/herself a die-hard fan because the team's success (e.g., winning or losing) has an impact (e.g., positive or negative) on their self-esteem. Whereas being a spectator at a local baseball game is merely a form of entertainment for them. From a marketing perspective, the implication is that one's degree of fandom is linked to their level of involvement and identification with the sport product. Sport marketing literature provides insight as to how supporter behavior is related to their consumption of sport products (e.g., ticket sales, television viewership) in order to predict how supporters will further immerse themselves in sport (Hill & Green, 2000; Mahony et al., 2002; Shank & Beasley, 1998; Van Leeuwen et al., 2002; Wann et al., 2001; Won & Kitamura, 2007).

However, these studies did not address the supporter who is a 'member.' While the concept of 'membership' may not resonate with most North American sport managers, it is essential to understand these stakeholders for the continued growth of Major League Soccer (MLS) clubs. For example, FC Barcelona of La Liga has the largest club membership base in the world with 168,000 registered members. The members have owned and operated the club since 1899, which has produced 25 Spanish league championships, with revenue from membership fees equaling \$20-million or 2% of its annual operating budget (McMahon, 2018). Therefore, based on previous research (Sutic, Fallon, Cieslak & Fullerton, 2011), the objectives of this study were to 1) examine the sport identity (i.e., spectator, sport fan and member) of MLS supporters, 2) describe what motivates these supporters (i.e., social interaction (SOC), performance (PER), (self-)esteem (EST), entertainment (ENT), diversion (DIV), knowledge of sport (KNW), community pride (COM), interest in athletes (ATH) and customer experience (CUS)), and 3) determine which factors promote and produce a transition along the sport identity continuum (i.e., from being a spectator to becoming a sport fan to becoming a member).

METHODS

This study consisted of two phases using convenience and snowball sampling methods to collect data through quantitative and qualitative surveys, respectively. Phase 1 had a total of 200-supporters of a newly formed MLS team, who were recruited via club management, complete a questionnaire to measure their sport identity (7-item SSIS; Wann & Branscombe, 1993), motives (27-item SuMS; Krajewski, Fosdick & Cieslak, 2014) and demographic characteristics (i.e., member status, sex and match attendance). To fulfill research objectives 1 and 2, descriptive statistics (i.e. frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations) and ANOVAs were calculated to compare the independent and dependent variables. Phase 2 included recruitment of ten supporters of the same MLS club to gain insight, through a semi-structured interviews, about their sport identity and motives to support their football club. The qualitative instrument consisted of nine open-ended questions to discover the transition between sport identities (Armstrong, 2007). To fulfill research objective 3, the interviews were recorded and transcribed and the information was organized into a matrix to establish and identify common themes and trends for cross examination (Silverman, 2006).

RESULTS

It should be noted that respondents represented supporters of an MLS club that begins official match play in 2020. Respondents included 120-males (60%) and 80-females (40%) and 114-die-hard fans (57%), 72-fair-weather fans (36%) and 14-spectators (7%). Additionally, sixty-four percent of respondents (n=128) claimed that 'Football/soccer is one of my favorite sports.' During the clubs' first season, it will host matches at a temporary

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stadium; approximately 31-miles outside of the city. For the 2020 season, 52% of respondents stated they would attend 10 or more home matches while 66% of respondents stated they would watch 10 or more matches. Because there were no significant differences between male and female supporters in their level of identification, the analyses of variances focused on the between group differences as it related to their motives.

An average score per item comparison, indicated these supporters rated 'entertainment' (6.82+/-2.18) as the most important factor followed by SOC (5.56+/-2.80), KNW (5.18+/-2.60), CUS (4.36+/-2.86), DIV (3.72+/-2.24), COM (3.57+/-1.54), EST (3.55+/-2.16) and INT (2.79+/-2.20) with the least important motive being 'performance' (2.14+/-1.82). The ANOVAs indicated there were significance differences ($p < .05$) in motives between male and female supporters with males scoring higher for 'knowledge of sport' and 'interest in athletes' and females scoring higher for 'diversion.' Additionally, there were significance differences ($p < .05$) in motives between spectators and fans with die-hard fans scoring higher than fair-weather fans, who scored higher than spectators for 'knowledge of sport,' 'diversion' and 'interest in athletes.'

The preliminary results of the interviews indicated that MLS matches and club memberships may be classified as symbolic products because the supporter is attempting to communicate an aspect of their self-concept to the other supporters. These results, as it relates to the model of symbolic consumption and spectator-fan-member cycle, will be discussed further.

CONCLUSION

These findings can be useful to MLS clubs and their marketing teams who seek to increase supporter participation, club membership and team success. For example, Geelong FC of the Australian Football League (AFL) has the largest club membership base in the AFL with 63,000 registered members. Both the membership base and ticket sales have increased annually by 6.94% from 1984 to 2016 and 16.3% from 2017 to 2018. Overall, these sales account for \$18-million or 28% of the clubs annual operating budget (GFCL, 2018). This continued communal and financial support of the club produced its seventh, eighth and ninth AFL Championships in 2007, 2009 and 2011.

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