

ANALYSING THE LOYALTY LEVELS DISPLAYED BY FOOTBALL FANS: A CASE STUDY OF AJAX CAPE TOWN FOOTBALL CLUB

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According to conventional wisdom, football fans exhibit perpetual loyalty to the clubs that they choose to support. These prevailing beliefs are by and large the product of the fanaticism and intense partisanship that fans show (Johnston, 2004). However in South Africa, the reality is that majority of the football teams are either failing to harness this loyalty or that the loyalty levels their fans display contradict conventional wisdom. Due to the important role that these fans play in revenue generation, there is need for leadership at these clubs to better understand this lucrative market.

The objective of this study is to establish whether the loyalty levels displayed by fans in South Africa correspond with or contradict conventional wisdom.

In general, football teams all over the country suffer from poor attendance figures. As physical attendance is one of the major forms in which loyalty is shown within the industry, poor figures may suggest that fans are not as faithful as perceived to be. The absence of comprehensive investigation into the matter within a South African context means that clubs lack the required understanding of their respective fan bases. This creates a situation which stifles the efficacy of management to implement positive changes.

A qualitative research approach will be used to collect data for this study. A case study research design permits the researcher to go beyond the surface and gain a broadened understanding of the topic. In addition, copious amounts of information can be gained in comparison to other methodologies and thus allow for in-depth insights which can refine current theory. An interview guide will be used to collect information from the fans and top management of Ajax Cape Town Football Club through face-to-face interviews. Each interview will be recorded with the aid of a voice recorder and all the data collected will be transcribed.

This study is anchored on Stewart and Smith's (2007) model of sports fan motivation, which views both intrinsic and extrinsic factors as essential features in attempting to explain and understand fandom. There are three core dimensions distinguished by the model. These relate to psychological, socio-cultural and social belonging motives, all of which facilitate the process of an individual becoming a fan and then consequently remain loyal. As the model refines mainstream literature on fan consumption motivations in a coherent, clear and concise manner, it is seen as the ideal tool for demystifying the loyalty of the football fan.

The preliminary findings from the study show that fans demonstrate more support to Ajax Cape Town when the team is winning as opposed to when it is going through a rough patch. In addition, as the team is part owned by Ajax Amsterdam and is named after it, its image is based on the Dutch club. This association results in fans either being drawn towards the club due to its European links or away from the club due to the lack of South African authenticity.

Conclusively, the lack of understanding of fans within football clubs means that it is difficult to communicate in an all-inclusive way, considering that not all fans are the same. If this situation is not

addressed, the attendance problem will not be able to improve and clubs will consistently miss out on revenue generation that comes with a populous stadium.

Based on the preliminary findings, the study suggests that leadership at South African football clubs should allow for open dialogues to be created where issues can be discussed so that practices implemented will better serve the target population. This can be done by implementing fan zones, fan clubs and generally improving the engagement with fans regarding aspects such as image design strategy.

REFERENCES

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