

Brand Values and a Typology of Premiership Football Fans

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Modern Tribes: Brand Values and a Typology of Premiership Football Fans

Abstract

Football brands are the focus for media, analysts and consultants but are little studied by research. This paper shows five brand values for football brands in the English premiership; Team Support, Organisational Values, History and Symbols, Social Entertainment and Self-esteem. These are weighted differently between clubs. Group 1 is emotionally attached and involvement varies with on-the-pitch performance. Group 2 are frequent attendees but less emotionally involved and Group 3 see football as social rather than emotional. This paper is the first to study brand values across Premiership clubs and provides insights into brand values which help to create effective marketing strategies and into fan responses to strategic decisions facing football clubs.

Keywords: Brand Values, Football, Fan Profile, Involvement.

Football is not just a “beautiful game,” it is a global and highly visible business whose customers are intensely loyal to their chosen brand. Although estimates of the size of the global sports business vary according to whether it encompasses sports participation and sports goods, it is variously valued as the 11th largest sector in the USA and as 3% of GDP in the UK. In 2005-2006 the total income of the “Big 5” European football leagues stood at £12.6 billion (\$18.54 billion) (Deloitte and Touche 2007), of which the English Premier League was the largest single contributor generating € 2 billion or \$2.9 billion.

Together with financial importance, sport is the focus of global scrutiny by media, analysts and academics and makes increasing use of business terminology such as brand and loyalty in its analysis of “football business.” Yet literature has been slow to study the nature of football brands and what we can learn from them.

Such papers as exist tend to focus on a single club (1, 2) and are based on limited evidence.

This paper studies the brand values that matter to Premiership football fans across a range of clubs. It studies the validity of the view that loyalty to football brands provides a sense of belonging and unity for adherents, that football brand communities are modern tribes. Having identified the brand values that matter to football fans, the paper then classifies the dominant values of fans from different Premiership football clubs to see whether there are significant variations in the nature of support within the Premiership.

Modern Tribes

A dominant theme in the press and among practitioners is that fans of football brands are “modern tribes.” This view seems to emanate from the arguments of post-modern marketing that belonging to a group of like-minded individuals, be it devotees of a particular type of music, participants in a sport, or attachment to a sports brand, provides a sense of unity and belonging which boosts the self-esteem of the group members (3, 4). There is a dichotomy, however, been studies and thinkpieces which argue that the “link” with the brand is more important than how well the club does or other characteristics of the brand (3) and studies which propose that the success of the team and other attributes of the brand affects the extent to which fans can boost their self-esteem by this type

of brand loyalty. Studies are often based on small samples and single brands, which limits the extent to which their conclusions have a broader validity.

Why view Sports Clubs as Brands?

Brands are important on a number of levels. First, depending on the nature of the market, up to 70 per cent of a firm's earnings can be attributed to brands (5).

Secondly, customers tend to build loyalty to strong brands (6). Finally, brands now provide the guiding principles for market-oriented organisations (7) and hence improve customer service. Over time, research attention has shifted from a focus on brand image to the creation of brand identity (8). The former centres on understanding what customers value in a brand, whilst the latter also encompasses the process of ensuring that employees' values and behaviour toward customers and other stakeholders is consistent with these. Identifying the elements of brand value in football clubs can provide a route map for employees to guide their behaviour towards fans. It can also help to inform strategic decisions – can the club relocate and re-brand? What will be the likely implications of a hostile takeover? Given the declining revenue from media, the future health of football brands is increasingly linked to maintaining good relationships with their fans. The understanding of why fans support and what matters provided in this paper could help to avoid conflict and loss of support such as that experienced by Wimbledon FC when they moved to Milton Keynes, or the backlash but continued attendance of matches by the majority of Manchester United fans.

What Matters to Fans?

A growing volume of attention is paid by marketing and sports marketing literature to the way in which fans identify with sports brands. English football brands are corporate brands. Hence the organization plays a prominent role and “stands behind the offering that the customer buys or uses” (7). Accordingly it is expected that fans place high levels of importance on the organisational elements of football brands (1, 2). When measuring brand equity, Aaker suggests (9) that the measures should cover the full scope of the brand equity, including awareness, perceived quality, loyalty and associations. A number of these aspects have been addressed by studies of involvement in professional sports.

In terms of perceived quality, economic studies (10) suggest that fans are more loyal to teams that are successful. This loyalty may be a result of the higher self-esteem which derives from supporting successful teams. In economic terms, success is also seen to translate into higher average attendance and lower variability of attendance (11). The economists’ view runs counter to that of some post-modern marketers that success doesn’t matter.

There is general consensus, though, that the value placed on sports brands is not just rational but is influenced by intangible, emotional associations with the club. Sociologists and psychologists suggest that being a fan fulfils the needs of

sharing, feeling and belonging. It provides an acceptable outlet for exhibiting emotions and feelings.” (12). Sports psychologists point to the complex relationship between fans and professional sports brands by suggesting that being a fan is relatively low risk. When the team does well the fan shares success and considers his or herself to have played a role in this. When the team does not do well the fan tends to externalise this and blame the players, manager or other external agents (13).

Many fans support professional sports clubs for the social and entertainment opportunities that these present. Loyalty becomes part of the pattern of behaviour of sports fans and therefore the potential for loyalty to this type of brand is considerable.

Propositions

There are compelling reasons for a larger scale study of football brands. There is much supposition about what matters to fans and a quantity of market research into who they are and other descriptive analysis. There is little discussion of “why” they support. Yet this information is essential to provide the organisational signposts for these corporate brands. Moreover, it would provide fuller insights into strategic decisions facing the football business. Accordingly the first proposition is:

1. Success and other attributes of football brands do matter in determining the extent to which the brand provides self-esteem to fans.

2. Profiles of Premiership fans vary. For some Premiership brands, emotion matters more than for others, for which the motivation to engage is dictated more by social entertainment and the success of the team.

The Survey

The sample for this study comprises fans of professional football (the English Premiership). Data were collected during the 2000-2001 season using a web-based questionnaire linked to both official club websites and to fanzine websites of Premiership football clubs. This paper studies responses across the Premiership (2557 responses). Although the questionnaire was based on concepts taken from previous research, we did not assume that the headings of emotion, social involvement, organisational values and team success suggested by Sutton et al (14) for North American sports would explain what mattered to the fans studied here. Rather, the data were studied to identify patterns which grouped together into brand values using factor analysis. This is designed to simplify data into a smaller number of distinctly separate headings, or constructs.

Premiership Brand Values

Analysis reveals five brand values for Premiership football brands. These are:

1. Team Support

This relates to the fans emotions and actions if the brand is successful. High scores relate to a positive response to success which seems fans engaging in

“increased support for the team.” If the brand performs well (on-the-pitch), then fans are more likely to talk about it, attend matches, take others to matches, wear a replica shirt, buy club merchandise, visit official club and fanzine web sites, subscribe to a club magazine and become more interested in football as a whole.

2. Organisational Values

High scores on this dimension reflect fans concerns that their club has financial stability, that it has funds to buy new players and a plan for future growth (in the case of football brands this translates into a concern that there is a strong youth academy, a top manager and coaches and a go-ahead board of directors). Ethics and community relations are also important. Fans value honesty and integrity in the club they support and it matters to them that the club has a good relationship with the community.

3. History, symbols and perceived knowledge

Football has a considerable history and this and the symbols that are linked with the football brand matter to fans. High scorers on this dimension can identify the team logo, motto, sponsors, the mascot, and the team's nickname. They also have knowledge of classic victories, goal scorers and opponents in cup runs and other past successes.

4. Social Activities

This captures the frequency with which fans attend matches and take part in other activities relating to the brand. High scorers on this brand value attend more matches, both home and away and cup and league. They are also more likely to participate in official transport to matches and attend events organized by the club. The fans may also participate in informal match related activities such as sharing transport to matches and making informal swaps of seats.

5. Self-esteem

High scores on this dimension suggest that fans experience a personal emotional response to how the brand performs. Rather than translating into actions as in (1), this emotional response indicates how fans feel about themselves in success and failure. Fans scoring highly here feel better about themselves and consider that they gain respect from friends and colleagues if the team they support is successful.

The Brand Value Profile of Different Premiership Clubs

Group	Club	Team-support	Organisational	History and Symbols	Social Activity	Self-Esteem
3	Chelsea	Medium	V low	Low	V v high	Low
3	Everton	Low	V high	Medium	High	high
3	Man Utd	Low	Medium	Low	High	V low
3	Liverpool	Low	Low	V V low	Medium	Low
3	Tottenham	Low	High	V low	High	Low
2	Southampton	Medium	V low	Medium	V low	Low
2	Middlesbrough	Medium	Medium	High	Low	Low
2	Man City	V low	Low	V high	Low	V low
1	Aston Villa	High	Low	Medium	Medium	Medium

1	Newcastle	High	Low	V low	Medium	Medium
1	Ipswich	High	Low	High	Low	High
1	Sunderland	High	Medium	Medium	Low	Medium

Table 1: Patterns of Similarity and Difference in Brand Values for Premiership Fans (Full scores are given in Appendix 1²)

When the clubs are grouped according to the average score for each Brand Value they fall into 3 distinct groups which are interpreted below:

- Group 1: Sunderland, Aston Villa, Newcastle, Ipswich**
 Team success has a lot of emotional impact and results in increased involvement with the brand. Fans have mixed participation and attendance. The history and symbols are of some importance to fans and success has a moderate effect on self esteem.
- Group 2: Middlesbrough, Southampton, Manchester City**
 Team success has some emotional impact, they participate and attend a lot, they have little knowledge about their club, their teams success has little impact on their self esteem.
- Group 3: Manchester United, Tottenham, Liverpool, Chelsea, Everton**
 Team success has little emotional impact but the brand is very important to these fans as a social activity. Fans have a lot of knowledge about their club.

Discussion

The findings of this paper provide empirical support for a number of the characteristics suggested by earlier research; football brands are important to self-esteem, this emotional bond also translates into broader activities of “support” which include wearing team colours and talking to others about this involvement with the brand.

The organisational values and corporate social responsibility of the clubs behind the football brands do matter to fans. This concern is not only at the

² Only 12 clubs had sufficient respondents to be included in this analysis.

effective management of the clubs, but at the broader role of the club in its community. Football brands also have a social component.

Sport is a live entertainment and should consider its competitive sphere not only to include other sporting events, but other types of social entertainment such as cinema and theatre or tourism. This history and symbolism of football brands do, however, provide it with a lever to continue to involve fans. Many alternative activities do not have the same involvement with the psyche and heritage of fans.

These findings lend support for the view that these are high involvement and highly emotional brands as suggested by post-modern marketing. Yet team success does matter to a majority of fans as do other attributes of the brand such as the values by which it is underpinned. It is not only the “link” but also the “thing” that matters.

The profile of brand values does, however, differ between clubs. Rival fans taunt each other with suggestions that one is more loyal, are better fans than another. This paper suggests that three groups of clubs exist within the 12 Premiership clubs studied in the cluster analysis. For the first group, team success is very important and fandom is fairly emotional. The second group are very active in attendance of matches, less emotional in their support than group 1 and are less concerned at the success of the team. For fans in group

3 view football support is more social than emotional. They are highly motivated by and knowledgeable about the history and symbolism of the brand with which they are involved.

Conclusion

Team Success matters to football fans and is seen to have an emotional impact. This translates into increased activity, spend on merchandise and engagement with the brand, as well as in how the fan feels about his or herself. There are, however, other values which are important in football brands. These are the nostalgic importance, social entertainment and the community role and values for which the brand stands.

In designing marketing strategies to develop these brands, football marketers should take into account the range of values that matter to fans. Moreover, they should be aware that these vary between clubs, with some clubs being more concerned with football as a social entertainment and others with stronger emotional responses. In addition to its role in effective marketing, this type of analysis offers insights into the likely response of fans to various strategic decisions taken by football businesses. For example, the strong social motivation of Manchester United fans gave an indication that, whilst there might be a reaction against the Glazer takeover (history and symbolism matter), a majority of fans would continue to attend and renew season tickets

because they value football socially rather than emotionally. A stronger decline in attendance and participation might be anticipated in similar circumstances for clubs in Group 1, whose involvement is more emotional and relates to their level of involvement with the brand.

Limitations and Further Research

The variations in the nature of fan involvement with football brands suggest scope for further research into the implications of different patterns of involvement on performance. Whilst this paper gives indications of the implications of high involvement and self-esteem on attendance and involvement with the brand, these preliminary findings indicate a need for more explicit study of the relationship between merchandise spend, sponsorship awareness and attitudes towards the sponsor's product or service. This is a fruitful area for further research.

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- 15.
- 16.

Appendix 1: Factor Scores

Rotated Component Matrix

	Component				
	1	2	3	4	5
Q5 Team Perf2	0.55	0.00	-0.09	-0.03	0.47
Q5 Team Perf4	0.77	0.05	-0.08	-0.11	0.12
Q5 Team Perf5	0.68	-0.01	0.05	-0.05	0.19
Q5 Team Perf6	0.83	0.03	0.01	-0.04	0.04
Q5 Team Perf7	0.86	0.04	0.03	-0.01	0.04
Q5 Team Perf8	0.84	0.05	-0.05	0.00	0.00
Q5 Team Perf9	0.84	0.04	-0.01	-0.01	0.01
Q5 Team Perf10	0.76	0.01	-0.02	-0.08	0.03
Q5 Team Perf11	0.73	-0.01	-0.02	-0.02	0.03
Q6 Org Ability1	0.17	0.47	-0.12	0.33	-0.09
Q6 Org Ability2	-0.02	0.74	-0.08	0.03	0.02
Q6 Org Ability3	0.04	0.73	-0.10	0.11	0.04
Q6 Org Ability4	0.05	0.77	-0.05	0.03	-0.04
Q6 Org Ability5	0.04	0.72	0.05	0.13	-0.02
Q6 Org Ability6	-0.08	0.69	0.22	-0.30	0.13
Q6 Org Ability7	-0.01	0.63	0.27	-0.36	0.13
Q13 Emotional attachment	0.17	-0.04	-0.14	0.54	-0.27
Q11 Sum 1-3 and 5-6	-0.01	-0.03	0.25	0.51	-0.03
Q11 Sum 10 to 14	-0.13	0.10	0.09	0.73	0.12
Q7 Activity Involvement	-0.04	-0.03	0.79	0.26	0.02
Q14 Sum 2 to 6	0.00	0.01	0.83	0.14	0.05
Q5 Team Perf1	0.03	0.08	0.07	0.13	0.77
Q5 Team Perf3	0.27	-0.02	0.02	0.09	0.68

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. A Rotation converged in 7 iterations.

Appendix 2: Mean factor score for each club - rankings included for each

factor

Club	factor score	Ran k	factor score	Rank	factor score	Rank	factor score	Ran k	factor score	Ran k
	1		2		3		4		5	
Man City	-0.84	1.00	-0.07	4.00	0.57	12.00	0.01	5.00	-0.51	2
Everton	-0.70	2.00	0.34	12.00	0.06	9.00	0.58	11.0	0.13	11

Man Utd	-0.58	3.00	0.05	9.00	-0.19	5.00	0.43	9.00	-0.62	1
Liverpool	-0.47	4.00	-0.07	3.00	-0.84	1.00	0.05	6.00	-0.27	4
Tottenham	-0.40	5.00	0.17	11.00	-0.57	2.00	0.52	10.0	-0.25	5
								0		
Southampton	-0.28	6.00	-0.31	2.00	-0.03	7.00	-0.47	1.00	-0.23	6
Middlesborou gh	-0.15	7.00	0.07	10.00	0.23	11.00	-0.15	3.00	-0.44	3
Chelsea	-0.14	8.00	-0.32	1.00	-0.25	4.00	0.91	12.0	-0.20	7
								0		
Aston Villa	0.05	9.00	-0.02	6.00	-0.11	6.00	0.20	8.00	0.02	8
Newcastle	0.09	10.0	-0.05	5.00	-0.41	3.00	0.13	7.00	0.05	9
		0								
Ipswich	0.11	11.0	0.00	7.00	0.19	10.00	-0.20	2.00	0.28	12
		0								
Sunderland	0.11	12.0	0.01	8.00	0.02	8.00	-0.06	4.00	0.06	10
		0								
Total	0.000		0.000		0.000		0.000		0.000	