

Investigating the role of sport consumer engagement in non-profit sport clubs.

Extended Abstract

Introduction

Commercial sport clubs have been gaining increasing numbers of members in recent decades, whereas nonprofit sport clubs and sport associations in Europe have experienced notable problems in recruiting or retaining members (Breuer et al., 2017; IHRSA Global Report, 2022). The reasons behind these trends include demographic changes and competition from commercial sports providers (Lang et al., 2019). Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the need for a strategic reorientation to avoid continued member loss, and increased the complexity of managing sport organizations (Robertson et al., 2022). One promising approach might be found in the concept of customer engagement (Hollebeek et al., 2014), which is linked to desirable outcomes including customer loyalty and firm performance (Barari et al., 2021). Hence, we investigated this concept and outlined the influence of team reflexivity, team identification and eudaimonic wellbeing on sport consumer engagement, which is associated with behavioral loyalty and voluntary engagement. Additionally, we tested the moderation effect of motivational intention and membership length on the relationship between team reflexivity and team identification.

Methodology

This study utilized a mixed-method approach and combined a qualitative pre-study (n=20) followed by a quantitative main study (n=298) with participants from non-profit sport clubs. Content analysis and partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) were applied to test the research model. PLS-SEM is designed to confirm the predictive power of models and seems particularly appropriate for increasing our understanding of complex theoretical models in the sports management discipline (Cepeda-Carrión et al., 2022).

Findings

The structural model accounted for 67% of the variance in sport consumer engagement, 48% in team identification and 37% in eudaimonic well-being. The results indicate that sport consumer engagement is positively associated with behavioral loyalty ($\beta = .41, p < .001$) and voluntary engagement ($\beta = .21, p < .001$). Team reflexivity ($\beta = .12, p < .001$), team identification ($\beta = .55, p < .001$) and eudaimonic well-being ($\beta = .30, p < .001$) positively influences sport consumer engagement. Furthermore, the findings show that team identification and eudaimonic wellbeing mediates the relationship between team reflexivity and sport consumer engagement significantly ($p < .001$). Skill-oriented motivation strengthens the relationship between team reflexivity and team identification ($\beta = .12, p < .01$), whereas social-oriented motivation has no significant effect ($p = 0.078$). Of interest here is the fact that membership length (not hypothesized) weakens the relationship between team reflexivity and team identification in such a way that when individuals have long membership, the effect of team reflexivity on team identification is lower ($\beta = -.09, p < .05$) than when members have short membership.

Implications

First, we support the notion that consumer engagement plays a critical role in nonprofit sport clubs, which is important to stimulate favorable outcomes such as commitment or loyalty. Hence, managers of nonprofit sport clubs are advised to implement strategic programs where professional and interactive team reflections on every level are conducted on a regular basis. This is especially true for team members with a shorter membership length. Studies have shown that team characteristics such as a shared vision and trust influence the level of team reflexivity (Widmer et al., 2009). Hence, managers are advised to work on improving or adapting these characteristics and communicating them to their sport club members. Furthermore, nonprofit sport club managers should use additional tools to strengthen team identification. Suggestions include arranging team and group activities outside of normal training or volunteer work, internal team competitions and get-togethers. These suggestions were also made by several interviewees in this study. Managers should focus on conducting group activities for social purposes, which

are perceived positively by sport club members and improve engagement levels (Behnam et al., 2021).

Limitations

As with every study, this study suffers from some limitations. First, sport club structures in Europe differ from other countries outside Europe, where antecedents might well also differ and could be elaborated in other cultural and geographical locations. Second, we did not investigate the professional levels of athletes, which could be considered in future studies. Finally, we used behavioral loyalty and voluntary engagement as single-items since these reflected actual behavior. Thus, further research could elaborate effect sizes in this context with multi-dimensional scales measuring preferences or intentions to further validate these results. Further research might also investigate how team reflexivity, team identification and sport consumer engagement change over time. Moreover, research could elaborate the role of team reflexivity quantity and quality, which might indicate a different influence on engagement levels. Lastly, research might investigate how variables such as team reputation, perceived image of the organization, or narcissism influence team identification (Larkin et al., 2021; Takamatsu, 2021) in sport club members.

Originality / Value

This study contributes twofold. First, we provide some fundamental insights in applying a proven concept to the sport context. This is of interest because sport consumers have unique characteristics such as a regular and recurring service utilization (e.g. coaching, facilities and medical services). Second, we advance the research on transformative sport services (Inoue, Sato & Filo, 2020) through an examination of the relationship between team reflexivity, eudaimonic well-being, and sport consumer engagement.

References upon request!