Growing the Football Game: The Increasing Economic and Social Relevance of Older Fans and those with Disabilities in the European Football Industry

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Globally, the success of contemporary sport organizations relies upon knowing the profile of existing and prospective customers and addressing and managing their expectations. In trying to grow the customer base of the football game, recent studies (Breitbarth & Harris, 2008; Downs & Paramio-Salcines, 2013; Paramio-Salcines & Kitchin, 2013; Walters & Tacon, 2011) have argued that key actors in the European football industry, such as football governing bodies and professional clubs, must embrace a wider strategic perspective in order to legitimize the game in the eye of all its stakeholders and develop new and existing markets. In particular, considering the needs and expectations of all fans can prove to address both the social agenda of inclusivity and the economic realities of a highly commercialized sport. It is in this context that older fans and fans with disabilities are described as the “new” generation of sport customers (Stone, 2013).

This paper contends that Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) demands that European football organizations begin to respond to the needs of all of their customers, including two of the traditionally underrepresented but important and growing segments of sport consumers, specifically people with disabilities and older people. Statistics show that out of more than 500 million people European citizens across 27 countries, there are combined more than 260 million people with disabilities and “old” people. As the European Commission asserts, the share of persons with disabilities and older people will continue to increase in the next five decades (Eurostat, 2012). This data provides initial evidence that this market segment should be valued by the football industry. Furthermore, as the general population ages, people develop age-related disabilities, a major demographic trend worldwide (Giddens, 2001).

In this paper, findings from case studies focused on English, Spanish, and German fans with disabilities and older fans, provide initial evidence that these growing market segments are worthy of further attention by the European football industry for commercial and social reasons. However, enhanced access to sport goods and services will not only create managerial opportunities for growing a sports’ fan base, it also challenges professional football clubs by balancing demands from different supporter groups and pressure from stakeholders to hold European football accountable for helping to progress inclusivity and diversity goals.

Review of Literature

Over the past decade, research on understanding the needs, sport and leisure habits and consumer expenditures of individuals and groups represents an important area of study within sport management (Pawlowski & Breuer, 2011; Taylor, 2011). Similarly, past studies in the area of football, inclusivity and diversity have not devoted sufficient attention to understanding the unique needs of fans with disabilities and older fans. Both fan groups are increasingly deemed an important subset of football consumers. Moreover, while attending football matches is recognized as one of the most popular forms of leisure activities worldwide, analysis of the economic and social relevance of these two “new” market segments as well as analyzing the connection between these two groups is still an under-researched area in sport management.

Establishing a business case for these consumer segments suggests that the market will economically and financially reward organizations (football clubs) that engage in CSR-related accessibility activities (Carroll & Shabana, 2010). At the same time, many practitioners and academics view providing universal accessibility for people with disabilities and older people at large sports venues in both Europe and the United States as an imperative based on ethical, legal and social justifications, rather than mainly based on economic reasons (Paramio, Campos, & Buraimo, 2011) despite the growing call by academicians and practitioners in both the U.S. and European sport industry that these “new” customer groups should be valued (Luker, 2012; Stone, 2011). An evolving managerial perspective is that focusing
attention on these market segments should be recognized and valued by the European football industry (Grady & Paramio, 2012). This necessitates a market-orientated approach to convince different stakeholders of the need to integrate these ‘new’ customer segments in society, the economy, and in the football industry. Despite these aims, there still exists notable resistance by management to devote additional resources to these customer groups. “Most managers remain unconvinced that people with disabilities can enhance their overall business performance. The challenge is therefore to present arguments that go beyond short-term cost-benefit analyses and to describe a long-term strategic case integrated into the broader diversity perspective” (Scott-Parker & Zadek, 2001, p. 120).

**Purpose/Objectives**

This paper builds the business case for inclusivity by combining social and economic arguments. Management scholars (Collins & Porras, 1996) have argued that managers need to overcome the restrictions of framing problems as ‘either or’ (e.g., either people or profit), and see opportunities in the ‘and’ (e.g., social inclusion and business growth). Hence, this paper seeks to provide substantial empirical indicators as well as a conceptual justification for the relevance of older fans and those with disabilities to European football in particular.

**Conceptual Framework**

According to CSR, sport organizations should recognize the interests of a wide range of stakeholders. It has gradually been acknowledged that those football clubs who want to present themselves as socially responsible organizations should pay greater attention and act responsibly towards a wide variety of issues, including relations with different stakeholders. However, when clubs want to define the range of issues that football clubs should focus their attention in order to translate stakeholder’s demands and expectations into practice, the “multidimensional nature of CSR in football clubs” in Europe is widely acknowledged (Walters & Tacon, 2011). This makes CSR a complex issue as there is no universal agreement on what areas European professional football clubs should be involved in when developing and implementing CSR initiatives (Paramio-Salcines, Babiak, & Walters, 2013).

**Discussion and Implications**

This study represents an initial exploration of the analysis of the economic and social importance of older people and those with disabilities as spectators at European football stadia. The business case for growing the game relies not only on market data indicating untapped fan potential, but also political pressure and policy expectations to support inclusivity and diversity. Furthermore, sport managers could benefit from listening and catering to the needs of fans with disabilities by identifying potential shortcomings in their infrastructure design and service operation that may likewise hamper the full enjoyment of able-bodied fans’ sporting experience. Thus, modern CSR becomes a framework for innovation and an intrinsic business driver that contributes to growth. For European sport organizations, such an ‘enlightened’ business approach to CSR may still be unusual due to their traditionally strong communal roots. Yet, considering the still dynamic commercialization and further professionalization of football, it is arguably inevitable to now embrace CSR beyond a charitable and philanthropic understanding.