Understanding the Role of Fan Club Membership on Service Quality Assessments in Professional Soccer

Rui Biscaia, Universidade Europeia & Universidade de Lisboa
Abel Correia, Universidade de Lisboa
Stephen Ross, Concordia University, St. Paul
Tiago Ribeiro, Universidade de Lisboa

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Fan club membership programs are of pivotal importance for European soccer clubs as this strategy generates a stable source of revenue (Biscaia, Ross, Yoshida, Correia, Rosado, & Marôco, 2015). European soccer clubs often have a consumer base consisting of both club members and non-members. While non-members are commonly referred to as causal customers, club members are those who pay a monthly or annual fee to have discounts in club services and products (e.g., season tickets and single tickets, magazine subscription, licensed merchandise) and benefits that are not available to other customers including voting rights for the board elections (Yoshida & Gordon, 2012). Fan club members often have a stronger emotional attachment to the team (McDonald & Shaw, 2005), and previous studies about club members and casual customers of the same organization have suggested that members are different in their evaluations of the services (Bhattacharya, 1998; Biscaia et al., 2015). Additionally, it has been suggested that the ability to offer high-quality services at the events is paramount for sport organizations in order to generate long-term benefits (Ko, Zhang, Cattani, & Pastore, 2011). However, there is a dearth of empirical research to understand whether fan club members differ from non-members regarding the assessment of service quality at the stadium. The exclusive focus on an overall population may limit the theoretical understanding and managerial implications of fans’ perceptions of the service quality. Thus, the purpose of this study is to compare service quality perceptions among fan club members and non-members.

Method

This study was conducted with a sample of fans from the top Portuguese professional soccer league. Data were collected using an online survey available on a Portuguese sports website with the support of the website manager. A banner was activated inviting visitors to access a survey link about their favorite team. In order to avoid redundant participants, the IP address was recorded and further access from these IP addresses was denied. The survey was available online during a period of three days with a total of 2013 individuals responding. After data screening, 1279 surveys were deemed usable for data analysis. The 30-item scale proposed by Biscaia, Correia, Yoshida, Rosado, and Marôco (2013) was used to access service quality. This scale includes the attributes of player performance, opponent characteristics, referees, frontline employees, facility access, seat space, security, facility aesthetics, crowd experience and game atmosphere. All items were measured on a 7-point Likert-Type scale (1=Strongly Disagree to 7=Strongly Agree), and data were analyzed using AMOS 22.0. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to verify the proposed service quality model in each group (fan club members and non-members). Next, a multi-group CFA was performed for testing the invariance of the model across fan club members and non-members. After testing the measurement invariance, latent mean comparisons were investigated to check the differences between the groups and Cohen’s (1988) d statistic was computed to obtain effect sizes.

Results

The results of the CFA for both fan club members [$\chi^2(360)=916.06$ ($p<.01$), TLI=.95, CFI=.96, GFI=.90, RMSEA=.05] and non-members [$\chi^2(360)=942.02$ ($p<.01$), TLI=.95, CFI=.96, GFI=.91, RMSEA=.05] showed an acceptable fit to the data. The composite reliability values were above the cut-off point of .70 (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2009) for both groups indicating the constructs were internally consistent. Evidence of convergent validity was accepted for both groups given that the AVE values were all greater than .50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Discriminant validity was also accepted in both groups given that the AVE value for each construct was greater than the squared correlation between that construct and any other. In terms of factorial invariance of the service quality model across fan club members and non-members, both the unconstrained model [$\chi^2(720)=1858.09$ ($p<.01$),
TLI=.95, CFI=.95, GFI=.90, RMSEA=.04] and the model constraining measurement weights [χ²(750)=1933.75 (p<.01), TLI=.95, CFI=.95, GFI=.90, RMSEA=.04] showed an acceptable fit to the data. The χ² statistic revealed that these models were significantly different from one another [∆χ²(30)=75.66, p<.01] suggesting the measurement invariance was not achieved. However, because full measurement invariance is rare, it has been suggested that partial measurement invariance can be assessed when measures are invariant across some but not all groups (Vanderberg & Lance, 2010). The change in CFI value between the models (∆CFI=.002) was lower than .01, and this value can be considered negligible (Castillo et al., 2010). Thus, based on the variation of CFI, the model’s invariance between fan club members and non-members can be assumed. Next, the non-members served as the reference group for examining the latent mean comparisons. The mean was set to 0 for this group, and to vary freely in the comparison group (fan club members). Significant differences were observed in the latent means (LM) for opponent characteristics (∆LM=.14, Z=−3.56, p<.01; d=.23), referees (∆LM=.12, Z=−3.82, p<.01; d=.24), security (∆LM=.14, Z=2.96, p<.01; d=19), and game atmosphere (∆LM=.08, Z=−2.19, p<.05; d=.14). The negative Z values indicate that fan club members have significantly lower latent mean values than non-members for opponent characteristics, referees, and game atmosphere, but a higher significant latent mean for security.

Discussion and Implications

These findings support the idea that a deep understanding of different consumer segments is paramount to create customized strategies for fans (Kim, James, & Kim, 2013), given that the perception of some service quality attributes varied between the two groups. Fan club members showed a better perception of security than non-members, which may suggest that regular patterns of game attendance could be linked to the sense of security in the stadium (Biscaia et al., 2013). Thus, clubs should invest in preventive security procedures aiming to enhance fan experience so that they perceive the stadium as a safe environment (Taylor & Toohey, 2006). On the other hand, fan club members were more critical in their assessment of game atmosphere. This may be related to the fact that fan club members tend to be more regular consumers (Biscaia et al., 2015), which makes them more knowledgeable about the service delivery. In this sense, the creation of an appealing ambiance with diversified special events should be a priority for clubs in order to maintain the interest of fan club members involved with the club and to attract new customers. Fan club members also showed a worse perception of opponent characteristics and referees than non-members, which may be related to the fact group members tend to have a stronger identification with the in-group (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998). That is, the connection of fan club members with the team may lead them to develop unfavorable perceptions of the people and/or groups that may compromise team success (i.e. opponents and referees). Finally, it is important to note that even though the differences in service quality attributes between fan club members and non-members were of low magnitude (Cohen, 1988), clubs should always try to increase their base of fan club members due to the associated financial benefits (McDonald & Shaw, 2005). Furthermore, fans are important stakeholders of professional sport clubs (McDonald, Karg, & Vocino, 2013) and those with a stronger link to the club (e.g. fan club members) should receive particular attention from the sport clubs (Senaux, 2008). Future studies comparing the perception of sport clubs and its services between fan club members and non-members should be conducted in order to increase our knowledge of the role of membership programs and to aid sport managers developing more targeted fan strategies.