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Brand Community, Loyalty and Promise in myfootballclub.co.uk

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Guilherme Guimarães is currently a partner at Ativa Esporte, a sport marketing consultancy, and Director Rio/Sports at the British Council. Following the completion of his MSc at the

University of Sheffield as a Chevening scholar, he moved back to Brazil. There, as a Sponsorship Manager for the bid committee and the Brazilian Olympic Committee, he helped Brazil secure the 2016 Olympics. Prior to that he contributed to different companies, such as Unilever, Nestlé, And1, among others, either as an employee or as a provider, totalling more than 15 years of experience. His research interests are around sport marketing and management, sponsorship activation and the effect of new social media in sports.

Dr Chris **Stride** is an applied statistician based at the Institute of Work Psychology, University of Sheffield, but publishing across a wide range of social science disciplines. He is particularly interested in the use of statistical methods to support and add rigour to research in areas where advanced quantitative analysis would traditionally be considered an anathema. Current personal research interests include cheating and ethics in football, the effects of residential and environmental design upon occupant's well-being, and commemorative cultures and nostalgic branding in sport and leisure.

Dr Daragh O'Reilly is a lecturer in marketing at the Sheffield University Management School. His research interest is in the relationship between markets, culture and consumption, with a particular focus on brands and culture.

Structured Abstract:

Purpose

The primary purpose of this paper is to link the notions of brand community, loyalty and promise as a reminder to marketers of the importance to brand communities of keeping their commercial promises.

Design/methodology/approach

The paper reports on a questionnaire survey (n=500) of members of a sport brand community as part of an investigation into the relationship between brand community and brand loyalty.

Findings

Brand loyalty was predicted by age, frequency of attendance, motivations for joining the brand community and the degree to which expectations built by the brand promise are met.

Research limitations/implications

In common with many inquiries in the area of brand community, this is a single case study. It is primarily a cross-sectional study, with a minor longitudinal element.

Practical implications

Branding practitioners and consultants with responsibility for brand community management issues need to balance the consumer-to-consumer dimensions of community with a careful understanding and operationalisation of the brand promise.

Originality/value (mandatory):

This is the first paper to integrate the constructs of brand community and brand loyalty with that of brand promise.

Keywords:

Brand management, Brand community, brand loyalty, brand promise myfootballclub.co.uk

Article Classification:

Research paper

Introduction

In 1973, Boorstin first put forward the notion of consumption communities (Friedman et al., 1993). Today, the marketing and consumer literature on communities has burgeoned into two broad strands, namely brand communities (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001) and consumer tribes (Cova and Cova, 2001; Canniford, 2011; Goulding et al., 2013). For the individual consumer, being in a group of others who are like-minded and/or share the same passion can help to meet profound needs for belonging and relatedness. Being part of a group also offers psychological benefits of membership, including a social identity (Verlegh, 1999), and feeling part of a positively regarded "in" group over or against some less well regarded "other" (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). In contrast to consumer tribes, where, broadly speaking, the emphasis is more on the consumer-to-consumer relationship than on the consumer-to-brand relationship, the sustainability of brand communities depends on the exchange relationship between the brand offering and the consumer-members of the community. This exchange relationship in turn depends on a wide range of marketing-strategy and consumer behaviour factors. There are many examples in the contemporary and less recent business world of strong brand communities, e.g. Harley Davidson, Apple, Starbucks, Troller, Game of Thrones, Warhammer, Star Wars, Facebook, GoPro, and, in sport, Boston Red Sox, Toronto Maple Leafs, or Boca Juniors.

One key issue in the exchange between any marketer and their customers is the notion of the marketing promise (Bailey and Bonifield, 2010; Stone and Ozimek, 2010). Given the turbulence of contemporary global markets, which are often electronically mediated (e.g., Mosavi and Kenarehfar, 2013), the sustainability of such brand communities also depends in part on

member loyalty. In this paper, therefore, we fill a gap in the brand community literature by analysing the relationship between online brand community, brand promise and brand loyalty in sport, specifically football.

Sport offers a vast, landscape of passionate communities gathered around commercial brands. Football is the paramount example of a sport which is both global as well as intensely local (Edensor and Millington, 2008). In football, the importance of consumer loyalty to one's club is difficult to overstate, with fans identifying closely with clubs in the neighbourhoods where they were born, or grew up, or even where their parents, particularly fathers, spent their childhoods - see, for example, Hague and Mercer (1998). Many fans would see themselves as much more than "consumers" (Oppenhuisen and Van Zoonen, 2006). The contemporary networked world makes it possible for fans to identify with, affiliate with, follow and support (in an increasingly active, if mediated, way) football clubs which are located thousands of miles away. This combination of global networks, fan passion, and highly mediatised sports brands has thrown up many interesting phenomena.

In this particular study, we examine loyalty in an online football brand community, myfootballclub.co.uk (henceforth "MyFC"), which, in 2008, became the first online brand community to take control of an association football (soccer) club, when a majority of MyFC's (then) 17,000 members voted to pay £600,000 for a 75% stake in Ebbsfleet United Football Club (henceforth "EUFC"), a small, long-established club in a minor UK League (The Football Conference, the 5th tier of English football). In this respect, the MyFC online brand community illustrates how consumer collectives can behave as marketplace actors (Cova et al., 2007). This

novel development attracted worldwide interest, and similar projects have since emerged in Brazil, Germany, Denmark, Italy, Japan, Spain and the USA.

At the heart of MyFC's marketing recruitment effort was an explicit brand promise "Own the club, pick the team". This strapline actually contained two clear and unequivocal promises, one of ownership, the other of the traditional managerial role of team selection. This led prospective members of the community to believe that they would have both an equity stake in the football club and a say in team selection. There was a clear mechanism available (i.e. voting via the website) to make the latter technologically feasible, and co-ownership made it seem a practical possibility. Chadwick et al. (2008) investigated the formation, organisation and management of MyFC, emphasising the uniqueness of the MyFC/EUFC model with respect to the potential influence of brand community members in the management of the brand. The possibility of becoming "more than just a fan" attracted thousands of supporters from many different countries to become fan-owners of MyFC/EUFC.

However, by May 2013, MyFC had sold its stake in EUFC. It had seen its membership fall considerably and its activity reduced to a sponsorship deal with Slough Town FC, a semi-professional club in the English Southern League Division 1 Central (English football's 8th tier). The MyFC model and its ultimate failure raise a number of questions: Do those who join such a scheme share particular demographic and football-relational characteristics? Are members of brand communities following a fad, or lured by brand promises that fit with their desires? Critically, can longer-term brand loyalty be fostered so that the brand community becomes sustainable?

The MyFC community's formal membership structure and accessibility offered the opportunity to quantitatively examine these research questions. By seeking answers to the above questions through a series of quantitative analyses, this paper aims to contribute to an understanding of this emerging ownership model. We analyse data gathered over a period of three months before the MyFC-EUFC relationship was terminated but encompassing the beginnings of their decline in membership. We follow exploratory analyses of the characteristics of MyFC members with inferential analyses linking community members' demographic profiles, relationship with football, reasons for joining (both brand-promise-related and other), and the fulfilment of their expectations to measures of their brand loyalty, including objective data on actual membership renewals. Our findings shed light on the reasons behind the failure of MyFC's foray into club ownership, and reflect the paramount importance of keeping commercial promises in the interest of brand community sustainability.

Literature review

We first draw upon a range of literatures to help frame the inquiry, including sports marketing, community and consumption; brand community; brand loyalty, and brand promise.

Sports Marketing, Community and Consumption

Money acquired from media rights has transformed football, with many clubs becoming publicly-quoted corporate businesses. This increased commercialisation has engendered a

countervailing push for involvement of fans in the running of clubs. Whilst initiated by supporters, this has been taken up by the UK government, most notably through facilitating the development of supporters' trusts (see Brown, 1998; Michie, 1999; Jaquiss, 2000; Martin, 2007; Kennedy, 2012; Ward et al., 2012). However this 'New Mutualism' has not led to fans taking major stockholding positions in bigger, wealthier clubs, where (lack of) money is a significant barrier to participation.

The internet offers a tool for forming and bonding sports brand communities (Beech et al., 2000). Auty (2002:273) argued it was "an ideal forum for fan power, providing a cheap and effective means of mobilising support for campaigns". It also gave the promoters of MyFC the means to build a brand community with a shared passion for football, and enabled voting on club issues both on and off the field, offering members a direct operational say in club management.

This latter development promised a further dimension to fandom. In addition to being a spectator or supporter, the brand promise was that a fan could be an active owner and manager. But who would this attract, and would their motives for joining differ from the motives behind their attendance at, or viewing of, football matches? Likewise, was the key brand promise of democratic participation deliverable, and would members be sufficiently convinced when the time came to renew their membership?

Brand Community, Brand Loyalty and Brand Promise

In 2001, Muñiz and O'Guinn proposed the notion of brand community, defined as a community coalescing around a commercial offering. This idea has opened the door to a range of inquiries

by pointing to the triadic brand-consumer-consumer relationship (e.g., Thompson and Sinha (2008); Schau et al., 2009; Willi et al., 2013; Stratton and Northcote, 2014). Subsequent related research has focused on how to strengthen brand communities (e.g., McWilliam, 2000; McAlexander et al., 2002), religiosity (Muñiz and Schau, 2005), brand narratives (Schau and Muñiz, 2006), building membership (Devasagayam, 2010), value (Schau et al., 2009), counter-brand communities (Cova and White, 2010), person-brand fit (Matzler et al., 2011), and knowledge-sharing (Sloan et al., 2015) among other directions. Research into online brand communities has examined how to utilise them in product development (Kim and Bae, 2008); promote consumer participation (Casaló et al., 2008), and how consumers engage with the community (Lee et al., 2011; Brodie et al., 2013; Baldus et al., 2015). Within sport, extensive empirical work has been carried out into brand communities, focusing on team and other group identities (Heere and James, 2007; Heere et al., 2011a; Heere et al., 2011b), new sport teams (Grant et al., 2011), brandfests (Woolf et al., 2013) and scale-free networks within a new brand community (Katz and Heere, 2013, 2015). A recent study by Yoshida et al. (2015a) found that “fan community attachment is the only construct that can predict attendance frequency over a longer period of time”, and a further study by Yoshida et al. (2015b) found that “fan community identification had positive effects on team brand equity and [...] fan community engagement, customized product use, member responsibility, and positive word-of-mouth”.

Both the latter studies point to the importance of loyalty, as do papers by McAlexander et al. (2003), Jang et al. (2008) and Thompson and Sinha (2008), but none of these focus on the crucial issue of the brand proposition, or, more specifically, promise.

Brand community theory's helpful focus on consumer-to-consumer relationships may distract from the underpinning of such communities by economic and marketing exchanges between brand and consumers. The question of community survival through continual membership renewal is important in the context of the MyFC scenario, where membership, like the renewal of a season ticket, requires an annual purchase decision (fee currently Stg£25) and helps to fund the community's *raison d'être*.

Membership lapsing, or "churn", is a perennial problem in market relationships across many different sectors. Identifying causes of churn is complicated in the football, or indeed wider sport spectator market, where brand loyalty is complex and may not be directly linked to satisfaction (Tapp, 2004). McDonald and Stavros (2007) suggest that, whilst many lapsed season ticket holders first signed up for altruistic or intangible reasons (i.e. to support a club or feel more involved), they lapse primarily due to an inability to attend games i.e. to give demonstrably active support. Attending games tends to reinforce the bond, but without that reinforcement, the relationship may wither and die after the first flush of enthusiasm fades (see Hunt et al., 1999); Sumino and Munehiko, 2004; Kwon and Kwak, 2014). This has implications for the MyFC brand community where most members are prevented by geographical distance (and associated travelling time and cost) from attending matches. The absence of a regular opportunity for live attendance and engagement suggests that the MyFC brand had to offer an alternative means of active engagement or risk fan churn. The MyFC website tagline positioned the club as "the world's local football club", encapsulating a global-local contradiction. For most MyFC members, active participation could only be through the online involvement that formed the

brand promise, e.g. buying or transferring players, financial decision-making, and, most notably, picking the team.

Although the notion of implied or explicit brand promise is accepted, it has been surprisingly infrequently researched. Chong (2007) examined the role of internal communication and training in delivering brand promise. Casaló et al. (2008) illustrated the importance of trust and honesty in relation to brand promise in a virtual community. Finally, Balmer and Thomson (2009) highlighted the importance of aligning brand promise and delivery. We, however, are concerned with brand promise as it relates to brand community membership. The MyFC brand community used the promises “Own the Club, Pick the Team” as a recruiting device, a strapline which promised benefits of (co-)ownership and (a share in) managerial control. The results of our study shed light on the connection between brand community, promise and resulting loyalty.

Research design

The choice of MyFC/EUFC for a brand community study was motivated by its position in a global industry known for passionate communities built around football brands, the issue of loyalty being particularly salient amongst football fans, and its role as an innovative experiment in integrating an online community with a “grassroots” local club, especially in projecting a brand vision that included active engagement (and democracy) as key values. . Theory development in the area of brand community has benefited from case study approaches, typically qualitative. This study also takes a case study approach, but uses a case-based survey questionnaire to test hypotheses. Study goals were to profile the brand community of MyFC and

to examine the relationship between their motivations for joining, perceived fulfilment of the brand promise, and brand loyalty.

Previous research has found differences in sports consumption across demographic groupings, for example gender and nationality (Lynn and Ridinger, 2002), and sporting interest (Funk et al., 2002). Tapp (2004) found that loyalty thrives as the supporter ages. One can also expect that fans with higher income would have greater ability to renew membership. Given the nature of the MyFC ‘experiment’ and the possibility of attracting people with both a strong commitment to football and to a team they already support, it was also desirable to ascertain their active interest in football and loyalty to a particular team brand. An active football consumer will attend football matches, watch football on television, and consume related media and merchandise. We would expect a positive relationship between commitment to football and brand loyalty. Thus we hypothesised:

- Hypothesis 1a: demographic factors will be associated with brand loyalty (i.e. to the MYFC project and, by association, EUFC).
- Hypothesis 1b: commitment to football will be positively associated with brand loyalty.

In this study, we sought to establish whether different motivations behind joining a brand community have differential relationships with loyalty, and whether that relationship is moderated by expectations being met. Consumer motivations with respect to sport include a wide range of possibilities – see for example Park et al., (2010), Kim and Trail (2012) and Ortiz et al. (2013). Similarly, the risk of churn is ever present, with its attendant costs (Corrado and Ferrand,

2006), and is likely to be related to the motivations that inspired the initial commitment. For instance those joining MyFC out of curiosity may have lost interest once that curiosity had been satiated. On the other hand, the MyFC project carried a specific and unique appeal to consumers with strong values around democracy and/or a motivation regarding the promise of team selection. Those members attracted by this dimension of the project would be those most likely to actively engage with it, and develop a deeper, longer-lasting bond with MyFC and EUFC. Therefore we hypothesised:

- Hypothesis 2: primary motivation for joining will have an effect on brand loyalty

Furthermore, whatever the primary motivation, if a member's expectations around that primary motivation are fulfilled we would naturally expect them to be more likely to renew their membership than someone whose expectations have not been met. If the MyFC project is to continue, it is important that a fan-owner's primary motivation for joining is honoured.

Therefore we hypothesised:

- Hypothesis 3: expectations being met with respect to primary reason for joining will have a positive effect upon brand loyalty.

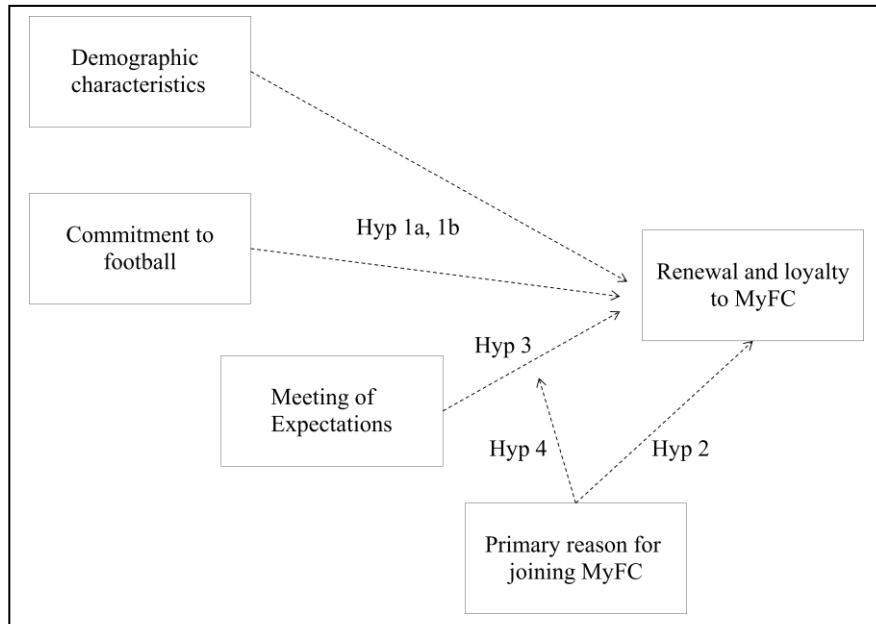
However, the strength of this relationship between expectation fulfilment and brand loyalty may differ by motivation. Those primarily seeking active involvement connected to the brand promise, such as testing their skills or taking a position of influence, will be those whose membership depended most strongly on such promises being fulfilled. Similarly, someone

joining for ‘softer’ reasons, such as for fun, sociability or curiosity, may have a more easy-going attitude to the fulfilment of their expectations and a different, less critical or reward-oriented attitude to renewal. Therefore we hypothesised:

- Hypothesis 4: the effect of expectations being met on brand loyalty will differ (i.e. will be moderated) by primary motivation for joining, with the relationship being stronger for those joining for active participatory reasons related to the brand promise.

Figure 1 depicts the hypothesised relationships to be tested.

Figure 1: Diagram of Hypotheses



Methodology

Sampling

The sampling frame was the membership of the MyFC brand community. This comprised approximately 30,000 people, according to the MyFC website (<http://www.myfootballclub.co.uk/>). Given the importance of member renewal in this inquiry, the survey was performed at the end of the first season. A pilot of the research was performed with volunteer MyFC members in the author's personal community network. Although a few suggestions made in the pilot survey were considered in the final questionnaire, no significant changes were made after this phase. A link to an online questionnaire was posted on the MyFC website accompanied by an invitation to take part in the survey. Three weeks later, the MyFC 'Webteam' also sent out the link and invited all members to complete the survey. Respondents numbered 500, representing 1.6% of the population, with a minor degree of attritional missing data (< 20 cases for all items henceforth described that were applicable to all respondents). Observation of the MyFC website around the time of the research showed that club voting involved around 1,000 members, with 50-100 members actively debating important issues on the website forum. The response sample of 500 therefore represents a satisfactory proportion of active participants.

Measures

The survey was comprised of items pertaining to respondents' demographic backgrounds; their relationship with football (both with the team they already supported and football in general); and their relationship with MyFC, in terms of both the project and EUFC.

Demographic variables collected were gender, age, highest educational qualification, nationality, occupation and annual income. 'Relationship with football' was probed via a series of questions designed to measure loyalty to a particular team and active interest in the sport. We asked respondents whether they supported any team other than EUFC prior to joining the MyFC brand community. Listed teams were subsequently grouped by standard and location into 7 categories (English Premier League, Football League, non-league; Scotland/Ireland; European clubs - Champions League regular participants; European clubs - other; Non-European clubs) with an eighth category 'None/only support EUFC' added. Further items investigated, with respect to the previous full season, how many of this other team's matches they attended, whether they purchased a season ticket for this team, and how often they watched this team's matches live on TV. Strength of commitment to football in general was gauged by the total number of matches watched on TV, and whether they purchased shirts or watched live matches of clubs other than EUFC or the club they had previously stated.

A respondent's relationships with MyFC and EUFC was first assessed by a dichotomous measure of tenure (whether they joined before or after the announcement that MyFC intended to

buy EUFC), and the number of EUFC matches attended in the 2007/08 season. Respondents were asked their primary motivation for joining, grouped into 6 categories; curiosity, to have fun/sociability, because they were already an EUFC fan, and three related to the brand promise, i.e. uniqueness of the project, to experience democracy in football, and to try out theories on football management and pick the team. This list was based on the literature review, brand promise and qualitative research performed in the community including four month's observation of the MyFC bulletin boards, and interviews with three MyFC brand community members. Forum discussions were scrutinised to gain insight into the motivations for joining; postings by active and dissatisfied fan-owners were particularly helpful, since, in explaining their dissatisfaction, they often revealed their principal motivations for joining. The main areas suggested in the literature review were covered, although some of the motives presented in theory were not applicable. Skill, drama and team effort were excluded because they relate to attending live sporting performances; achievement was excluded since the club to be taken over was, necessarily, at a relatively low level. Respondents were also asked whether their expectations of the community had been fulfilled (Yes vs. No).

Following the approach of Johnson et al. (2006), who suggest repeat purchase intention as a loyalty measure, we assessed loyalty to the MyFC brand by asking participants whether they intended to renew their membership upon expiration. Furthermore, for 319 respondents (62%) we were able to obtain actual renewal data four months after the survey, providing an objective measure of loyalty. Finally, loyalty to EUFC itself, potentially a distinct construct given the recency of the purchase, was examined through asking those who had stated support for another team at the time of joining the project whether or not they would now support EUFC in a

competitive match against that team. Respondents who supported only EUFC were excluded from analyses involving this variable. This measure of loyalty taps into the primal instincts of any football fan, and provides an emotion-based indicator of their connection to the practical outworking of the MyFC project.

Initial descriptive analyses utilised frequency tables, cross-tabulations and bivariate correlations to describe the sample and relationships between demographic characteristics, motivations, fulfilment of expectations and loyalty, and assess any potential bias related to missing data for the analyses restricted to the subsample for which we had actual renewal information. Our hypotheses were then tested via regression analyses, which probed each path in the model illustrated in Figure 1.

Since we had objective renewal information for only a sub-sample of respondents, we first checked (using chi-square tests of the null hypothesis of no association) that response on this variable was not associated with demographic characteristics, relationship with football, motivation for joining, or fulfilment of expectations. Evidence that response to renewal information was associated with variables within our model would weaken the generalisability of results to the wider MyFC brand community.

The first stage of the regression analyses, testing hypothesis 1a and 1b, assessed the impact of demographic and football-related variables upon each loyalty outcome variable (specifically anticipated renewal, actual renewal, and ‘support against other team’). Significant predictors that emerged were retained as controls in the model for subsequent analysis stages, which tested the

relationships between a respondent's primary motivation for joining, their expectations being fulfilled, and loyalty (hypothesis 2, 3). Finally, to examine the moderating effect of motivations upon the relationship between fulfilment and loyalty (hypothesis 4), we added the interaction between (i.e. product of) motivations and fulfilment of expectations to the model.

Separate regression analyses were run for each loyalty outcome variable. Since these outcomes, and that of expectations being met, were dichotomous, logistic regression (Tabachnik and Fidell, 2007) was used to assess the strength of predictor variables, predict odds ratios and response probabilities. Categorical predictor variables were dummy-coded, with the last-numbered category selected as the reference category other than for primary motivation (Fun/Sociability as reference) and other club supported (English Premier League as reference). In all inferential analyses, the $p < 0.05$ level of statistical significance was used, with one-tailed tests applied where hypotheses were directional.

Results

Sample description

Respondents ranged from 16 to 68 years old (mean = 35 years) and were predominantly (96%) male. The majority were UK residents, though 18% came from other European nations and 14% from North America (14%).

Seventy-one percent of respondents joined MyFC before the plan to purchase EUFC was announced in November 2007, though just 23 (4.6%) were EUFC fans before the club was

finally purchased by MyFC. Ninety-one percent claimed to support another team as well as EUFC; predominantly English Premier League or Football League teams. However the nature of this support for other teams tended towards the passive, with 57% having not attended any home games in the most recent season. Active support for EUFC was weak, with under 10% attending 5 or more matches in the 2007/08 season though, of those who claimed to support another team, 33% would now support EUFC if they played that other team.

The most popular primary motivation for joining MyFC was the uniqueness of the project (50%), followed by the desire to take part in democracy in football (18%) and curiosity (12%). Three-quarters felt that MyFC had met expectations regarding their primary reason for joining. However, at the time of the survey, only 52% were anticipating renewing their membership - eventually, of the 319 members for whom we had subsequent renewal information, 62% did renew. A series of chi-square tests did not find evidence to reject the null hypotheses of no association between any study variable and the presence of actual renewal data.

Bivariate relationships

Relationships between respondent's motivations for joining, their demographic profiles, relationships with football and with MyFC are summarised in tables 1a and 1b. There was no evidence of any association between respondent's reasons for joining MyFC and their demographic background, other than with their age. Older members were more likely to have joined primarily because of supporting EUFC, whereas those who joined for fun and sociability, or to try theories on football management tended to be younger.

However there was evidence that a respondent's relationship with football was associated with their primary reason for joining MyFC. Existing EUFC fans were, of course, more likely to have joined for that reason, but fans of other non-league clubs appeared less likely to have joined to experience democracy in football than fans of Premier and Football League clubs. Fans who joined the brand community after it was announced that EUFC were the team to be purchased were again less likely than early adopters to have joined based on the brand promise of experiencing democracy. Active supporters of other clubs were less likely to have joined to try theories on football management and more likely to have joined for sociability/fun than those who were not.

A significant association (chi-square = 46.08 on 5df, $p < 0.05$) was also found between primary motivation to join and the meeting of expectations with respect to this primary motivation (Table 2). Only 30% of respondents who joined primarily to test their theories on football management felt their expectations had been met, compared with at least 69% of respondents citing a different primary reason. A similar statistically significant relationship existed between motivation and anticipated renewal, and one of a similar size (though not quite achieving statistical significance) with actual renewals; again, those who joined to test theories were less likely to renew.

Relationships within and between the meeting of expectations and loyalty outcome variables (anticipated renewal, actual renewal and supporting MyFC against your 'other' team) were assessed using Phi Correlation coefficients. Unsurprisingly, there was a positive relationship between the meeting of expectations and each outcome ($0.14 < \phi < 0.41$, $p < 0.05$) with the

weakest relationship being with support for EUFC vs. 'other' team. The results also indicated a strong positive relationship between anticipated and actual renewal ($\phi = 0.47, p < 0.05$) though not so large as to establish anticipated renewal as a proxy for actual renewal for those cases without the latter information. Measures of renewal shared no more than small to medium positive correlations with supporting EUFC against your 'other' team ($0.11 < \phi < 0.26$), indicating that this latter construct of loyalty to EUFC was distinguishable from loyalty to the project.

Table 1a: Respondent's motivations for joining MYFC split by their demographic profile

		Percentage cases selecting each primary motivation for joining MYFC						Chi-square stat, df
Demographic variables		Social / fun	Democracy	Unique project	Curiosity	Test theories / pick team	Already EUFC fan	
Gender:								5.41, 5
	Female	15.00%	20.00%	60.00%	0.00%	0.00%	5.00%	
	Male	8.24%	18.22%	50.33%	12.36%	7.16%	3.69%	22.96, 15
Nationality:								33.45, 30
	UK	7.96%	19.38%	46.71%	13.49%	6.23%	6.23%	
	Europe	9.41%	16.47%	60.00%	7.06%	7.06%	0.00%	
	Nth America	13.85%	18.46%	49.23%	9.23%	9.23%	0.00%	
	Rest of World	2.56%	15.38%	58.97%	15.38%	7.69%	0.00%	
Occupation:								25.31, 20
	Unskilled/Skilled Manual, Supervisor	5.26%	18.42%	50.00%	10.53%	10.53%	5.26%	
	Clerical	12.00%	12.00%	52.00%	4.00%	12.00%	8.00%	
	Managerial	12.05%	24.10%	48.19%	6.02%	7.23%	2.41%	
	Professional/Technical	5.93%	15.81%	55.34%	13.04%	5.14%	4.74%	
	Sales/Retail	5.56%	16.67%	66.67%	11.11%	0.00%	0.00%	
	Student	14.71%	29.41%	26.47%	17.65%	11.76%	0.00%	
	Unemployed/retired	5.26%	15.79%	52.63%	15.79%	10.53%	0.00%	

Income:

0-20K	16.67%	20.83%	35.42%	14.58%	6.25%	6.25%
20-40K	8.67%	18.00%	56.00%	7.33%	6.67%	3.33%
40-60K	6.78%	20.34%	50.00%	12.71%	9.32%	0.85%
60-80K	2.74%	19.18%	54.79%	10.96%	5.48%	6.85%
80K+	11.24%	14.61%	46.07%	17.98%	5.62%	4.49%

20.27, 20

Educational Qualification

GCSE or equiv	7.89%	21.05%	55.26%	5.26%	2.63%	7.89%
A-Level or equiv	10.96%	19.18%	49.32%	10.96%	4.11%	5.48%
Further Prof/Tech	5.56%	24.07%	53.70%	7.41%	5.56%	3.70%
Undergraduate degree	9.19%	14.59%	46.49%	15.14%	10.27%	4.32%
Postgraduate degree	7.75%	20.16%	54.26%	11.63%	5.43%	0.78%

Age: (mean)	32.5	35.2	36.1	33.1	31.1	40.1	NA
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Table 1b: Respondents' motivations for joining MYFC split by their relationship with football

		Percentage cases selecting each primary motivation for joining MYFC						
Relationship with football		Social / fun	Democracy	Unique project	Curiosity	Test theories / pick team	Already EUFC fan	Chi-square stat, df
Other club supported								154.49, 35*
	English PL	8.56%	17.57%	51.80%	13.51%	7.21%	1.35%	
	English FL	10.38%	24.53%	48.11%	10.38%	6.60%	0.00%	
	English non-league	7.69%	7.69%	76.92%	7.69%	0.00%	0.00%	
	Scottish/Irish	7.69%	19.23%	46.15%	23.08%	3.85%	0.00%	
	European, CL	21.74%	8.70%	56.52%	0.00%	13.04%	0.00%	
	European, not CL	3.57%	21.43%	53.57%	17.86%	3.57%	0.00%	
	Rest of World	4.76%	19.05%	57.14%	4.76%	14.29%	0.00%	
	Support only EUFC	2.33%	11.63%	39.53%	6.98%	4.65%	34.88%	
% home matches of Other club attended 2007/08								14.27, 10
	0%/support only EUFC	7.12%	17.97%	49.15%	13.22%	7.12%	5.42%	
	25%	10.38%	16.04%	53.77%	8.49%	9.43%	1.89%	
	50%+	11.11%	22.22%	53.09%	11.11%	2.47%	0.00%	
% away matches of Other club attended 2007/08								5.14, 5
	0%/support only EUFC	8.38%	18.53%	49.49%	12.18%	6.85%	4.57%	
	25%+	9.09%	17.05%	56.82%	10.23%	6.82%	0.00%	
% matches of Other club on TV								42.47, 10*
	0%/support only EUFC	4.65%	18.60%	45.74%	13.95%	5.43%	11.63%	
	25%+	10.39%	18.83%	52.60%	14.29%	3.90%	0.00%	

	50%+	9.55%	17.59%	52.76%	8.54%	10.05%	1.51%	
Shirts of Other club owned								24.74, 10*
None/support only EUFC		5.35%	16.87%	53.50%	12.76%	4.94%	6.58%	
One		11.33%	19.21%	46.80%	11.82%	9.85%	0.99%	
Two or more		13.89%	22.22%	55.56%	5.56%	2.78%	0.00%	
Watching live football on TV								12.74, 10
Less than once a month		4.55%	27.27%	54.55%	9.09%	4.55%	0.00%	
At least once a month		8.73%	21.43%	47.62%	18.25%	3.17%	0.79%	
At least once a week		9.56%	17.06%	53.58%	9.90%	8.87%	1.02%	
Further shirts (not Other club or EUFC) owned								20.45, 10*
None		9.12%	16.11%	49.85%	13.07%	6.69%	5.17%	
One		5.22%	24.35%	53.91%	11.30%	4.35%	0.87%	
Two or more		13.16%	18.42%	50.00%	2.63%	15.79%	0.00%	
When did you join MYFC?								37.42, 5
Pre- buying EUFC		8.48%	20.76%	50.88%	11.70%	7.60%	0.58%	
At/Post- buying EUFC		8.76%	11.68%	50.36%	12.41%	5.11%	11.68%	
EUFC matches attended 2007/08								157.90, 10*
None		8.70%	18.06%	53.51%	13.71%	6.02%	0.00%	
1-4		9.63%	20.00%	48.89%	10.37%	10.37%	0.74%	
5+		4.26%	14.89%	38.30%	4.26%	2.13%	36.17%	

* Statistically significant association between relationship with football variable and motivation at $p < 0.05$ level

Table 2: Number and percentage of respondents reporting fulfilment of expectations and loyalty, split by primary motivation for joining

Outcome	Primary motivation for joining MYFC						Chi-square Statistic, df	% Yes over sample
	Social / fun	Democracy	Unique project	Curiosity	Test theories / pick team	Already EUFC fan		
Expectations fulfilled	34 (82.93%)	61 (69.32%)	201 (82.38%)	44 (77.19%)	10 (30.30%)	14 (77.78%)	46.08, 5*	334 (75.68%)
Anticipated renewal	26 (63.41%)	50 (56.82%)	136 (55.74%)	19 (33.33%)	9 (27.27%)	11 (61.11%)	20.96, 5*	251 (52.18%)
Actual renewal	18 (69.23%)	39 (68.42%)	102 (63.75%)	22 (62.86%)	7 (33.33%)	8 (66.67%)	9.19, 5	196 (63.02%)
Support Ebbsfleet vs. 'other' team	13 (32.50%)	25 (30.12%)	80 (34.93%)	13 (24.07%)	11 (35.48%)	2 (50.00%)	3.25, 5	144 (32.65%)

* Statistically significant association between outcome and primary motivation at $p < 0.05$ level

Hypotheses testing

The first modelling stage assessed the unique effects of the demographic variables on each outcome. Age exhibited statistically significant unique effects upon anticipated and actual renewal, with older MyFC members more likely to both state that they expected to, and to actually renew their membership. Actual renewal, and the third outcome, support of EUFC against their other team supported, were also related to nationality; fans from North America being most likely to renew and to support EUFC against their other club, with fans from the UK least likely to. Other demographic variables were unrelated to loyalty. The cumulative results of these analysis partially support hypothesis 1a.

Retaining demographic predictors found to be statistically significant predictors of any of the three outcomes, namely age and nationality, we tested hypothesis 1b by examining the unique effects of the variables measuring a respondent's relationship with MyFC and football in general. These were: the time-point at which they joined; support of another club when joining MyFC; and extent of support for both EUFC and other clubs through match attendance, TV viewing and shirts purchased. EUFC match attendance was found to have a significant positive impact on anticipated and actual renewal. Compared to a reference category of 5+ games, attending just 1-4 matches decreased the odds of renewal by 50%. The only other effect found upon renewal was that of 'other club supported'; those supporting Rest of the World clubs were the most likely to anticipate renewing (their odds of renewal estimated at over 6½ times that of fans of English PL clubs).

The effects of 'relationship with football' variables upon hypothetical support of EUFC against their other team were more widespread than those upon renewal. Whilst attending EUFC matches again had a positive effect on this measure of loyalty, the point at which a member joined MyFC, their attendance at matches of their other club and the number of shirts of clubs other than EUFC or their other club supported were also significant predictors. Members joining after the link-up with EUFC was announced were more likely to support EUFC in such an encounter, as were respondents who bought shirts of other 'neutral' teams. Such shirt-buying may indicate a lack of loyalty to their (primary) 'other supported club' and subsequent ease in transferring loyalties to EUFC. Conversely and unsurprisingly, those who attended more home matches of their 'other supported club' were less likely to transfer loyalty to EUFC. This pattern of effects upon the three loyalty outcome measures supports hypothesis 1b.

Demographic and relationship with football variables found to be statistically significant predictors were retained as control variables in subsequent stages of analysis, which started with the testing of hypothesis 2 by adding to the model the variable indicating a respondent's primary motivation for joining MyFC. This variable (dummy coded, with 'uniqueness of project' as the reference category) had a significant effect upon anticipated and actual renewal, supporting our hypothesis. Those joining to try out their theories on football management were least likely to anticipate and actually renew, whereas those joining for fun/sociability were most likely to. Motivation for joining had no effect on support of EUFC against other team supported.

We then investigated the impact of respondents' expectations of the MyFC project being met upon loyalty. A positive effect was found on all three outcomes; estimated coefficients for the model at this stage of the hypothesis testing are given in table 3. The odds of a respondent whose expectations were fulfilled anticipating renewal were over 11 times greater than one whose were not ($\text{Exp}(B) = 11.05$); the odds of both objective renewal and supporting EUFC vs. their 'other' team, were likewise doubled by fulfilment. ($\text{Exp}(B) = 2.20, 2.12$ respectively). Effects of the primary motivation for joining MyFC upon anticipated and actual renewal found at the previous stage of testing were still statistically significant (Wald = 14.44, $p < 0.05$; Wald = 11.64, $p < 0.05$), indicating that the effect of motivation upon renewal operated independently of expectations being met. We thus have support for hypotheses 2 and 3.

Table 3 Logistic regression analysis predicting loyalty from demographic profiles, relationship with football, primary motivation for joining MyFC and fulfilment of expectations

Predictors	Model 1: Outcome = Anticipated Renewal (N= 474)			Model 2: Outcome = Actual Renewal (N = 307)			Model 3: Outcome = Loyalty to EUFC if they played 'Other club' (N = 451)		
	B	Wald	Exp(B)	B	Wald	Exp(B)	B	Wald	Exp(B)
Demographic Variables									
Age	0.04	11.09	1.04	0.03	4.40*	1.03	0.02	3.01	1.02
Nationality: Total effect† (df = 3)	--	3.24	--	--	5.89*	--	--	21.79	--
Relationship with football / MyFC									
EUFC games attended 07/08: Total effect† (df = 2)	--	43.67	--	--	18.13	--	--	18.56	--
Other Club Supported: Total effect† (df = 7)	--	13.98	--	--	6.99	--	--	1.36	--
When did you join MyFC (1= post-EUFC vs. 0= pre-EUFC)	-0.26	0.94	0.77	0.59	3.11	1.81	0.54	4.04*	1.72
Number of Other club home games attended 07/08: Total effect† (df = 2)	--	1.63	--	--	2.16	--	--	20.47	--
Number of shirts owned of clubs other than EUFC / Other club: Total effect† (df = 2)	--	0.38	--	--	3.44	--	--	2.17	--

Primary motivation for joining MyFC

Motivation: Total effect (df = 5)	--	14.44	--	--	11.64	--	--	1.22	--
		*			*				
Democracy††	-0.16	0.11	0.85	0.00	0.00	1.00	-0.07	0.02	0.93
Uniqueness††	-0.63	2.18	0.53	-0.36	0.48	0.70	0.00	0.00	1.00
Curiosity††	-1.51	8.17*	0.22	-0.01	0.00	0.99	-0.32	0.33	0.73
Try theories††	-1.21	3.41	0.30	-1.68	4.98*	0.19	0.34	0.28	1.40
EUFC fan††	-1.83	3.60	0.16	-2.53	4.47*	0.08	NA	NA	NA

Fulfilment of expectations

Were expectations fulfilled? (1=Yes, 0=No)	2.40	51.18	11.05	0.79	5.94*	2.20	0.75	5.11*	2.12
		*							

* Statistically significant effect at $p < 0.05$ level

† Effects of each dummy variable vs. reference category excluded for reasons of space but available from the authors on application

†† vs. ref cat (Social/fun)

Finally we tested for the moderation effect of primary motivation upon the relationship between expectation fulfilment and loyalty, by adding the interaction effect (product) of each dummy variable for primary motivation with expectations being met. There was no evidence of any effect upon membership renewal; expectation fulfilment had a similar positive effect upon renewal regardless of primary joining motivation. However, there was evidence of a significant moderating effect (Wald = 8.39, df = 4, $p < 0.05$) when predicting ‘supporting EUFC against

other team supported'. Specifically, the importance of expectations being met in predicting loyalty was stronger for those who had joined based on the brand promise of trying theories on football management, than those who primarily joined for any of the other reasons categorised, giving partial support to hypothesis 4.

Discussion

The typical MyFC brand member appears to be a middle-aged UK-based male professional, with an existing relationship with football through support of another team; most would be classified as light or casual attenders (Tapp, 2004), albeit active through regular televisual means and shirt purchases. Of those claiming to support another team, a third stated that they would now support EUFC if they played that other team, an indication of having developed strong feelings of affiliation with EUFC and the MyFC brand community encompassing their purchased brand - or perhaps a lack of commitment to their other team.

Intuitively, one would expect that a brand promise of democracy would attract democrats. However, MyFC did not do this. It is particularly significant that less than one in five joined to test football management theories or experience democracy in football (fans of other non-league clubs appeared least likely to have joined for this latter reason, perhaps because non-league clubs already offer greater perceived democracy; or because they did not regard the purchase of a small local club by thousands of largely non-local 'members' as democratic). So, although MyFC promised fan ownership, it was not besieged by football democrats or fantasy managers. Instead, it attracted better-off, well-educated casual fans, whose primary motivation was the

uniqueness of the project. This suggests two possibilities. Firstly, the decision to become a member of the MyFC brand community has more to do with symbolic consumption than football politics. People joined for a sense of positive distinction and social identity, and for the expressive value of being able to say they 'owned' a stake in a football club. Secondly, it may be that those attracted to join are "consumer innovators" (Goldsmith et al., 2003), who "wish to learn about and own the newest products", and represent a key target segment for innovative offerings.

Though 75% of respondents felt that the brand community had met their expectations regarding their primary reason for joining, many fulfilled respondents were unlikely to renew. Tapp (2004) found a churn rate of 12.5% amongst season ticket holders, even amongst what he termed "the fanatic end". Potential causes included home moves, changes in financial situation, membership being a gift (Bhattacharya, 1998), or having children. The implications of churn for brand communities are considerable: unless community membership recruitment is simultaneously growing, then the membership will decline, with associated problems for cash-flow and sustainability. It is not clear what action MyFC was taking to counteract or compensate for churn at this time.

Loyalty to the MyFC brand community was related to age, nationality and the number of EUFC matches attended. Those likely to be loyal to EUFC specifically include non-Europeans, multiple shirt owners, and casual attenders of their other team's home games. Of those who joined because of the uniqueness of the project, more than four-fifths said that their expectations had been fulfilled. Similar levels of fulfilment were reported by those who joined for fun/social

reasons, curiosity, or because they were already an EUFC fan. A large majority of those who joined to experience democracy were satisfied (69%). However those with managerial ambitions reported dramatically less fulfilled expectations.

As one would expect, whether or not expectations built by the brand promise were met had a significant effect on loyalty. This is 'common sense' customer retention. Those whose expectations were met were more likely to renew and support MyFC against their other team; conversely those who joined to take an active role in management, and were promised in theory the chance to do that by involvement in managing/picking the team, were particularly unfulfilled and therefore far less likely to renew. The brand promise of MyFC was "Own the club, pick the team". Whilst ownership, and the more general uniqueness of the project were clearly offered, the latter part of this brand promise was not fulfilled. This was essentially because of a need for the actual manager of the team to be in control of the players, and his understanding of players and their performance. On reflection, the 'pick the team' part of the promise was unrealistic. It was felt that it was more sensible to let the manager pick the team rather than have this determined by a large number of individuals who might not be in possession of all relevant information at the time at which they exercised their vote. Here, the ideal of participative democracy conflicts with the reality of professional managerial specialisation, experience and expertise, as well as operational convenience.

The comparison with those who joined for reasons of democracy, and who showed relatively high levels of both fulfilment and renewal, is interesting. It was possible for the 'democrats' to actually run the club, but not for managerially-minded individuals to pick the team. It should be

pointed out that the MyFC/EUFC organisation offers many opportunities for members to get involved in club administration. However there are two main issues for members wishing to take up these opportunities, namely where they live relative to Ebbsfleet, and how much time they can spare for club work.

The effect of expectations met on renewals does not differ significantly according to motivation – i.e. there was no evidence that being disappointed or satisfied had a differential effect on the tendency to renew depending on what respondents aimed to get out of joining the MyFC brand community. However the effect of expectations being met on loyalty with respect to the ‘match against other team’ variable does vary by motivation. For those who joined to try out their theories in managing it has a stronger effect than for those who joined for softer or clearly fulfilled reasons (fun, uniqueness, curiosity, democracy).

Marketing has always been about an exchange relationship, not just a social relationship. The message for marketing scholars and professionals is: Keep your eyes on the ball, i.e. the business, not just the community. Firstly, for scholars, Muñiz and O’Guinn’s paper (2001) introducing “brand community” spawned a significant stream of research with the focus on the ties that bind consumer collectives. Yet, the resulting emphasis on the social side of brand-consumer-consumer relationships meant that the fundamental issue of the deal, the brand promise, was for a time obscured. In this paper, we contribute to theory by offering an approach that integrates “prior thought and research into [...] a different way of understanding” the phenomenon (Corley and Gioia, 2011, p.19). Our paper integrates the economic back into the

social by reminding scholars about the underlying brand promise(s) that, in the end, underpin and help to sustain communities of consumption of particular brands. The power of the internet makes it likely that further examples of similar online communities will emerge, and it is important for the marketing literature to keep abreast of these developments and be able to develop theory to handle them. Future quantitative and qualitative research could specifically consider the factors affecting loyalty in brand communities, both in relation to brand promise but also with respect to fan affiliations, affective relationships with the brand, fan segmentation and, of course, financial income. Secondly, for marketing professionals in football, wider sport and non-sport brand communities, the message is: keep your brand promises! This requires a clear understanding of what those promises are, whether explicit or implicit, which in turn requires regular and thorough fan research. It also means that marketers need to understand whether their promises can be, and are being, operationalised and whether they are credible to fans. Therefore, in the interests of sustaining the brand community, the annual brand audit should include forensic scrutiny of the brand promise and whether the members believe it is being kept.

Limitations

This was primarily a cross-sectional study; however, we do have a post-survey measure of loyalty in actual renewal. It would have been fruitful to follow members from their joining of the MyFC community, measuring commitment to EUFC and to MyFC over the year. The sampling procedure was a non-experimental design using purposive sampling, with obvious potential for bias. Since the link to the research was posted on the community website, self-selection occurred; a clear limitation of the sampling process. However, given the virtual nature of MyFC, performing an online survey was not only convenient, but appropriate. It could be argued that posting the survey link in the website would result in collecting just the most active respondents;

however, the link and a request to fill in the survey were emailed to all members/owners. To check for differences between profiles of respondents and non-respondents, demographic information received from the respondents was checked with the official website statistics and no substantive differences were observed. Nevertheless, even with all the methods adopted to minimise bias and test the validity of the data, it is still important to treat the information with great care since, considering the low response rate, differences may exist between the total population and our sample. The number of completed questionnaires within the response sample was high. Furthermore, we have used an objective measure of loyalty (actual renewal) from a different (and the most reliable) source, at a later date. In regards to the generalisation of the findings, it is important to remember that the sample of this survey was limited to the MyFC community members.

Conclusion

Performance on the football pitch has not always brought success for MyFC. EUFC were relegated, then fought their way back into the National Division of the Football Conference, and are now in Conference South. In common with many football clubs, particularly at a time of recession, MyFC/EUFC experienced ongoing financial problems and membership issues. In 2013, a Kuwaiti-based consortium took over EUFC, leaving MyFC free to consider other club ventures. In July of the same year, it concluded a sponsorship deal with Slough Town FC, of the Southern Football League Division 1 Central, in an arrangement rather different than the EUFC deal. Tellingly, the promise of picking the team no longer features on the MyFC web-site home page, confirming that this was a promise that could not be sensibly operationalised. Instead, the MyFC strapline reads simply: “the world’s first web community owned club”.

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