



The development of a causal relationship model of factors influencing the loyalty of football clubs' fans in the Thai premier football league

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Abstract

This study aimed to develop a causal relationship model of factors influencing the loyalty of football clubs' fans in the Thai premier football league. A hypothesis model consisting of 15 selected factors derived from the examination of related theories and research findings was developed. A Likert type, 5 rating scale questionnaire was constructed and used as the research tool. Such questionnaire was statistically tested both for content validity and reliability. The data were collected from a sample of 538 selected home teams' fans who attended 6 selected stadiums in the tournament. The LISREL version 8.72 program was a statistical tool to examine the construct validity of variable in the hypothesis model and to evaluate the fitness of the structural equation model (SEM). The evidence showed that the adjusted model fitted with the empirical data. The causal factors directly influencing loyalty were interest in team, interest in sport, vicarious achievement, wholesome environment, entertainment value, bonding with family and community support at .05 of the statistical significance. Those factors had the total influencing power of 67 percent on loyalty.

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Introduction

Despite the reformation of the football league tournament in Thailand, the internal management of each club or arena is still different, resulting in a changing number of spectators for each tournament due to factors influencing the decision of each person. A fan's loyalty is one of the most influencing factors for any sport spectators. Smith and Stewart (2007) mentioned that die-hard fans demonstrate loyalty in certain ways for example purchasing team merchandise and spending lots of money to travel out of state to see their team play. Research into the football spectators' internal feeling that determines their behavior will allow the football clubs or tournament organizers to understand their decision making better, which will help generate more income for the club and development of professional football circles in Thailand. The

researcher was therefore interested in studying factors influencing football fans and creating loyalty for football clubs in the Thai Premier League in order to develop a model of causal relationships that can be used as guidelines for further improvement of management effectiveness of the related parties.

Literature review

Fan's Loyalty Concepts

Funk and James (2006) explain that the loyalty of fans is classified into two aspects: attitudinal aspect and behavioral aspect. The attitudinal loyalty is reflected through individual's emotion towards a particular team and it is the reason why that team is valuable and meaningful to him/her.

Furthermore, loyalty can also be one-dimensional and multi-dimensional. There are two independent dimensions: attitude and behavior (Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978).

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Fan's Attitudinal Loyalty

The attitudinal loyalty is expressed through fans' psychological will. The said will includes emotional or psychological attachments to a brand. To measure psychological loyalty, three elements are taken into consideration: inner attachment, persistence and resistance. This has been consistent with many previous studies that deployed all three elements in the measurement of psychological loyalty (Gladden & Funk, 2001; Mahony, Madrigal, & Howard, 2000).

Fan's Behavioral Loyalty

The behavioral loyalty is expressed through past purchasing behaviors or through word of mouth about advantages of product and service (Sereerat, 2007). It also means being part of a brand. In considering applying the customer's behavioral loyalty for the measurement of fans' behavioral loyalty, various researchers have identified factors that can determine behavioral loyalty as follows (Bauer, Stokburger-Sauer, & Exler, 2008; Gladden & Funk, 2001; Mahony et al., 2000):

- a. Taking part in watching a match of the favorite team in the arena.
- b. Following the favorite team via live television broadcasting.
- c. Regularly accessing news of the favorite team from various media.
- d. Supporting legal goods of the favorite team.
- e. Wearing team shirts or shirts with the club logo of the favorite team.
- f. Attempting to persuade others to support the favorite team.

Theory of the Sport Interest Inventory Scale (SII)

According to a past study, SII Scale offers the result which is easy for adaptation for the audience's motivation test in a variety of sports. Therefore, this Scale has been widely popular and reliable worldwide (e.g., Funk & James, 2004; Neale & Funk, 2006).

The Sports Interest Inventory (SII) gives a description of elements that create interest for the sports consumer. The situational and hedonistic motivations that motivate individuals have been categorized. The situational elements are, family bonding, friends bonding, player interest, role model, team interest and vicarious achievement. Hedonistic elements, on the other hand, are drama, entertainment value, escape, excitement and socialization. This model will assess how sports consumers who are aware of football can progress to the attachment to a sports team through the aforementioned factors.

Definitions and Meanings of the Factors

This study emphasized the measurement of 15 selected factors of a fan's loyalty derived from numerous related theories, research studies and the consideration of the social and cultural appropriateness of Thailand. All the factors applied in this study have been described as follows:

1. Bonding with family (Bw_fa) means the opportunity to spend time with family members to develop stronger involvement or relationship.

2. Bonding of friends (Bw_fr) means the opportunity to spend time with friends to develop a stronger involvement or relationship.

3. Drama (Dra) means a comparison between competitions which are similar and those with sole advantages with elements of uncertainty of the competition result.

4. Entertainment value (Ev) means the value of entertainment experienced by sport fans upon entry into the sport tournament in relation to the value of money spent on the experience.

5. Escape (Esc) means "escapade" or participation as part of anything which is distinguished from a regular routine.

6. Excitement (Exc) means feelings of liveliness when surrounded by the tournament atmosphere and other spectators.

7. Interest in player (Iip) means specific attention and follow-up of a favorite player.

8. Role model (Rm) means a player's good self-conduct as a model for youths.

9. Socialization (Soc) means the opportunity to interact with other spectators and sport fans to share interests and build a new relationship.

10. Interest in team (Iit) means interest in the whole team, not particularly for any player.

11. Vicarious Achievement (Va) means the level of team potentiality that results in more self-esteem of the sport audience.

12. Interest in sport (Iis) means the level of interest in a kind of sport that is the reinforcer affecting further interest in a team.

13. Aesthetics (Aes) means beauty of football as a result of playing, that emphasizes strategies or tactics.

14. Whole Environment (We) means the general atmosphere inside the arena that creates positive feelings to the audience.

15. The Community Support (Tcs) means participation in the community residing around the location of sports team.

Methodology

This research aimed to develop a model of casual relationship of factors influencing the loyalty of football clubs' fans in the Thai Premier Football League. The research is quantitative research using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) as a platform for MIMIC Model (Multiple Indicators Multiple Causes (MIMIC) Model).

Participants

The subjects in this research were the spectators of the Thai Premier Football League in the host arena of all 18 football clubs who participated in the tournament of Thai Premier Football League for the 2018 annual tournament season. The samples of football stadiums were selected using the Multi-Stage Random Sampling Method. Six stadiums were chosen for data collection. The selection started from the 6 geographical regions. One football club was drawn from each region and one match was randomly selected from the host stadium.

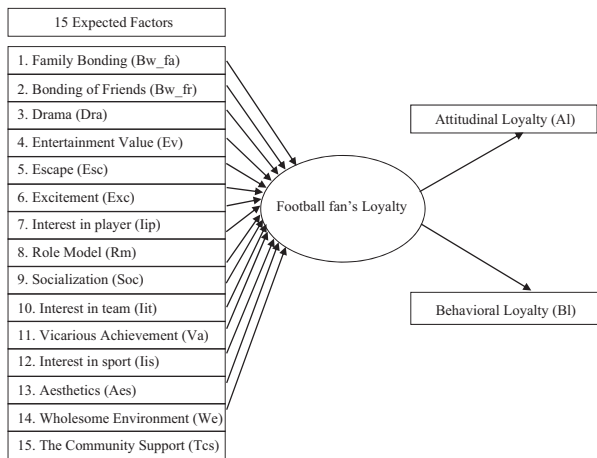


Figure 1 Conceptual model of the research

As the exact number of population was unknown in this research, the researcher therefore defined the size of sample using sufficiency criteria in the exploratory factor analysis and structural equation modeling analysis. Schumacker and Lomax (1996) proposed the application of Rule of Thumb in the way that in statistical multivariate analysis, the size of sample of 10–20 times per 1 research variable or not fewer than 500 units should be used. The total variables in this research were 53 variables. Therefore, the researcher defined the sample size of not fewer than 530 home teams' fans of Thai Premier Football League from six football stadiums at random using Accidental Sampling for 90 home teams' fans per stadium (randomly selected from those who showed the home club signature at the entrance). The total sample size actually used in the research was 540 home teams' fans.

Data Collection

The research tool is a Likert type, 5 rating scale questionnaire which was constructed from the study and summary of relevant concepts, theories and pieces of research both nationally and internationally to study factors of a causal relationship structural model that influences the loyalty of football clubs' fans. It was approved for quality inspection by measuring Content Validity Value with the calculation technique of Index of Item Objective Congruence (IOC) at .921, and Reliability at .942.

The researcher travelled to six stadiums of the Thai premier football league tournament to meet and distribute the questionnaire to the research participants. 540 sets of questionnaires in total were distributed and 538 sets or 99.63 percent were returned.

Data Analysis

Structural Equation Model (SEM) Analysis technique was applied in the analysis and construction for the model of causal relationship model since causal variables were observation variables and dependent variables were latent variables. There were two observation variables of loyalty:

Attitudinal Loyalty and Behavioral Loyalty. The model was analyzed using LISREL Version 8.72 Package. The data analysis process started from recording scores acquired from the questionnaires in the SPSS program; measuring Percentage, Mean and Standard Deviation of the studied Observation Variable; checking data dispersion for each observation variable from Chi-square testing statistics; checking the relationship of studied observation variable in all models by measuring Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient value; checking Linear Relationship of the studied observation variable in the model for all variable pairs in order to check whether each variable pair has any linear relationship with Plot Graph Technique.

The developed hypothesis model was analyzed to check whether it fitted with the empirical data using statistical techniques including Structural Equation Model (SEM) Analysis with LISREL Statistical Software. It was done by determining the Specification of the Model to link the relationship of observation variable which is the element of each latent variable in the model. Under the determined hypothesis, the identification of the model was performed using T-Rule condition and using Recursive Rule. Parameter estimation from the model was performed using Maximum Likelihood Method.

The hypothesis model and empirical data were checked for fitness using measure Index (Joreskog & Sorbom, 1996) for mutual consideration including Chi-Square (χ^2), Relative Chi-Square Ratio (χ^2/df), Goodness of Fit Index (GFI), Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI), Root Mean Squared Residuals (RMR), Standardized Root Mean Squared Residual (SRMR), Root Mean Squared Error of Approximation (RMSEA), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Normal Fit Index (NFI), and Incremental Fit Index (IFI).

The researcher adjusted the hypothesis model using a statistical method to acquire one which was approved for checking with measures based on the criteria. Values between the adjusted model and the empirical data were shown and statistically acceptable.

Results

The developed and adjusted Structural Equation Model was fitted with the empirical data and was passed for the determined criteria (Joreskog & Sorbom, 1996) ($\chi^2 = 14.45$, $df = 8$, $p\text{-value} = .07086$; $Relative\chi^2 = 1.80$; $GFI = 1$; $AGFI = .96$; $RMR = .0067$; $SRMR = .0098$; $RMSEA = .038$; $NFI = 1$; $IFI = 1$; $CFI = 1$; $CN = 751.69$).

However, causal factors directly affecting loyalty were Interest in Team, Interest in Sport, Vicarious Achievement, Whole Environment, Entertainment Value, Bonding with Family and The Community Support, at influence coefficient values equaling to .08, .10, .23, .15, .11, .09 and .32 at statistical significance level of .05. Variables of Socialization and Escape did not directly affect loyalty at the statistical significance. All casual variables could mutually influence loyalty for 67 percent.

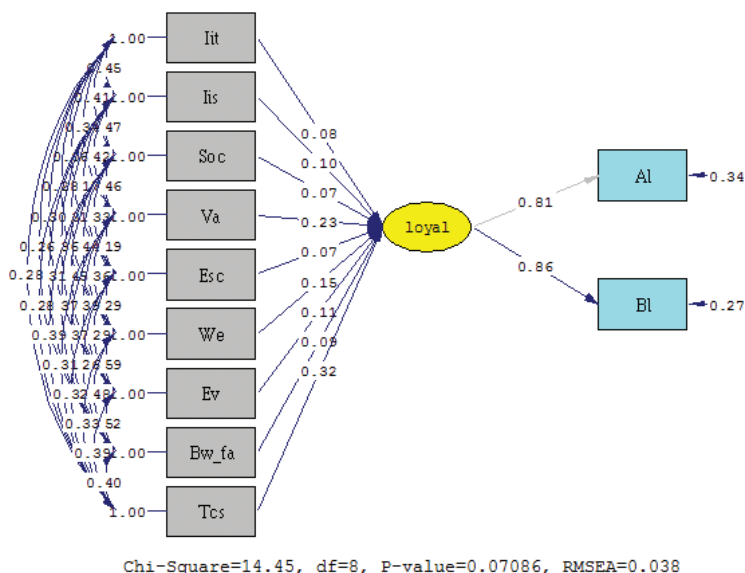


Figure 2 Adjusted Structural Equation Model

Discussion

The findings indicated that casual factors directly influenced loyalty at .05 level of statistical significance for all of the seven factors, respectively.

The Community Support

The community support factor had a maximum direct loyalty influence coefficient at .32 which was consistent with past research papers (Wilkins, 2012; Woratschek, Horbel, & Popp, 2007). Woratschek et al. (2007) concluded that in order to build loyalty of the fans, sports managers must find opportunities to interact with people in the community, participate in their activities and build relationships with local residents. This can be turned into positive attitudes and potentially into loyalty for a football club. Wilkins (2012) supported the idea of participation in the community activity as a way to reinforce the existence of clubs, athletes and personnel. This will also create a good image for the club in a sense that the club pays attention to the well-being of the people in the community. Therefore, football clubs in Thai Premier Football League that are located in the community in various provinces should take the opportunity to engage themselves with activities that encourage participation from local residents to build relationships and faith for the clubs. This will further lead to long-term loyalty and stably increase the number of fans.

Vicarious Achievement

The vicarious achievement factor had a direct loyalty influence coefficient at .23 which was consistent with many past research papers (Neale & Funk, 2006; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). They agreed to the idea that vicarious achievement contributed to loyalty because humans wanted to be successful. When their favorite players won, the fans would feel that they, too, won.

Therefore, any football club aiming to enhance commitment of sports fans towards the teams should always maintain the level of skills and victory so that the sports fans will gain good experiences, allowing them to share feelings of vicarious achievement, which is an important factor driving both attitudinal and behavioral loyalty of sports fans.

Whole Environment

The whole environment factor had direct loyalty influence coefficient at .15. The environment was a crucial part in stimulating the spectators to be loyal and view sports as stated in many past research papers (Bauer et al., 2008; Wakefield & Sloan, 1995). Therefore, it is necessary to be aware of what the spectators are interested in or demand from each arena entry. Football clubs in Thai Premier Football League hence should thoroughly consider the environment of the arena used in their tournaments in order to improve and change for desired consequences and respond to meet the demands of the football fans of their teams. This will directly affect experiences or entertainment value assessment from re-entry and secure loyalty of football fans.

Entertainment Value

The entertainment value factor had direct loyalty influence coefficient at .11 which was consistent with many past research papers (Chen, 2004; Funk & James, 2004). Entertainment may include music, cheerleading activities, restaurants and competitions. Thus, football clubs of Thai Premier Football League should take an interest in activity organization to entertain their football fans who enter to view a match in the arena. Attention must also be paid to accessibility to services inside the arena, which will contribute to the feelings of happiness and worthiness of football fans' experiences.

Interest in Sport

The interest in sport factor had direct loyalty influence coefficient at .10. This was consistent with many past research papers (Kotze, 2010; Mahony et al., 2000). Interest in sport is one of the four factors that can be used to predict the fans' loyalty (Kotze, 2010). It was also found that interest in sport can have a large impact on the duration of spectatorship (Mahony et al., 2000). Thus, football clubs in Thai Premier Football League should give precedence to those travelling to watch the competition since they have interest in sport to begin with. If they are taken care of or perceived to be significant to the clubs, it will be easy to increase loyalty of football fans toward the clubs, and those who are not yet football fans of the clubs may decide to join.

Bonding with Family

The bonding with family factor had direct loyalty influence coefficient at .09. This was consistent with many past research papers (Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001; Funk & James, 2004). Waan et al. (2001) posited that a person's desire to spend time with a family can be a motivation fulfilled by consuming sports. Therefore, football clubs in the Thai Premier Football League should plan and promote activities that will facilitate the participation of fans and their families and increase the number of loyal fans. It will be more rapid and sustainable than emphasis on an individual or pair of sports fans who come to view the competition. In addition, the children who come to view the competition together with their families may be directly and maximally influenced, resulting in an impression that may bring about sustainable loyalty throughout the life span of those children.

Interest in Team

The interest in team factor had direct loyalty influence coefficient at .08. This was consistent with many past research papers (Neale & Funk, 2006; Wang, Zhang, & Tsuji, 2011). They proposed that interest in team can be used to predict both attitudinal and behavioral loyalty. Therefore, football clubs in the Thai Premier Football League should be enthusiastic to enhance the relationships between the spectator and sports team. If the team can positively interact with sports fans with high level of interest in the team, it will be a great opportunity to develop and promote the team commitment as well.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This research findings showed that only 7 factors out of the 15 expected factors had the influential power on loyalty. The causal model of factors consisted of Community support, Vicarious achievement, Wholesome environment, Entertainment value, Interest in sport, Bonding with family and Interest in team. All causal variables could mutually predict loyalty for 67 percent.

A model from this research can be applied as a guideline for benefits of more base expansion on membership group or football fans of the clubs. Moreover, it will also be useful for the improvement and development on the organizing format

of football fields, football teams and activities to enhance effectiveness and meet the satisfaction of the spectators. Public relations is the most significant task of all football clubs. Each football club should have a team of personnel who can make an effective plan of activities, implement them with the clubs' fans and annually evaluate the results for continuous improvement. The limitation of this research lies in the collection of data that focused on only the clubs' fans who attended matches in the selected stadium. There would be quite a number of club's fans who followed the results of their teams from various kinds of media. Therefore, further investigation should take the factors of information channels for the club's fans into consideration.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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