



Assessing the importance of spectators to soccer clubs in South Africa: A management perspective



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Orientation: This study investigates and analyses the perceptions of soccer club managers based on spectators' loyalty factors, values and challenges concerning soccer clubs in South Africa.

Research purpose: These results could assist managers of soccer clubs to be able to manage these aspects in order to sustain a competitive advantage.

Motivation for the study: This study could contribute to deeper insight into the role of spectators' loyalty, value and how it could contribute to the development of soccer partnerships in South Africa.

Research design, approach and method: In the case of this study, qualitative research was done to obtain relevant information from the senior management of the nine clubs with regard to the aspects of loyalty, the role of spectators within the clubs and the challenges faced by club managers to gain loyal spectators. During face-to-face interviews, the senior management were assured that their answers are confidential and would be used for the purpose of this study as a means of ensuring trustworthiness and qualitiveness. Selecting these people was based on their relevance for the study and their status in the senior management. Each club session interview took one and a half hours at a central location convenient for respondents. The same researcher was present during each of the club's meetings to keep data accurate and consistent. Notes were taken and all sessions were recorded. Respondents in the interview were informed about the aims and procedures of the study.

Main findings: The value of spectators to soccer clubs in South Africa was identified to be commercial value, partnerships value, marketing value and spiritual shareholders value. Marketers need to be aware of their spectators' needs in order to build the relationship and should focus on commitment, customer satisfaction and customer retention as well as trust and brand identification aspects when developing marketing strategies.

Practical/managerial implications: The challenges faced by managers to sustain loyalty to their clubs were identified as absence of heroes, economic climate, safety and security, marketing and public relations. Managers of clubs need to develop their clubs to surpass their current levels of loyal membership and supporters and establish the brand identity of their clubs to increase the satisfaction of their current spectators and to earn more club money for the players.

Contribution/value-add: As stated above, this study focused on assessing the importance of spectators with regard to soccer clubs in South Africa from a management perspective, which could be utilised to gain competitive advantage.

Keywords: challenges; loyalty; soccer; South Africa; spectators; sport; value.

Introduction and background

In recent years, the behaviour of sport spectators has received increasing attention in academic literature. A better understanding of how and why sport spectators go to stadiums, travel great distances to support their sport clubs and buy merchandise is of great interest to sport marketers (Biscaia 2016:3; Xu 2015:12). Soccer, in particular, is perhaps one of the greatest phenomena in terms of its attraction for hundreds of thousands of occasional spectators of every age and gender, who come together in soccer stadiums around the globe every week to watch the games (Biscaia 2016:3). Understanding sport consumer loyalty is arguably one of the most important concerns in sport marketing and customer-relationship management (Bodet & Bernache-Assollant 2011:781; Wilkins 2009:27). Kim, Trail and Ko (2011:576) found that a 'good relationship with sport consumers by sport clubs is a critical factor for successful sport business' because it is much cheaper to serve loyal customers and easier to maintain their support (Handley 2012:22).

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Sport clubs are no exception and need to retain spectators; they have been losing these drastically because the market place has become very competitive (Douvis 2014:47; Mullin, Hardy & Sutton 2007:174; Samra & Wos 2014:263). Understanding what makes spectators decide to return to the game is important for clubs to be able to formulate relevant effective marketing strategies (Samra & Wos 2014:263; Shobian 2012:1). Spectators play a significant role in helping sport clubs to generate revenue (Hall, O'Mahony & Viecell 2009:2). From understanding how the managements of these sport clubs recruit spectators to attend games, sustaining the existence of their spectator base and their perception of spectators' loyalty, the questions that arise are: What is the value of spectators with regard to the soccer club, how do managers foster these spectators and what are the challenges faced by managers inhibiting spectator loyalty to soccer clubs? These results could assist managers of soccer clubs to be able to run their soccer clubs in a more effective and efficient manner in order to sustain a competitive advantage.

Literature review

Sport industry is a world-reaching business with over US\$620 billion spent annually (Kearney 2011). The sport spending is growing faster than the gross domestic product (GDP), and 43% of sport market is dominated by soccer, with the least share of 3% belonging to golf (Kearney 2011). According to Bal, Quester and Plewa (2010:40), the future sport sponsorship in developing countries is growing. South African sponsorship market is estimated to be R7bn (Sport Industry Group South Africa 2012). In South Africa, 70% corporate spending in sports is on sponsorship (Klayman 2008; Van Heerden & Du Plessis 2004:71). Key indicators of this trend are investments, for instance made by Amalgamated Banks of South Africa (ABSA), the country's largest retail bank, that invested more than R500 million over 5 years to secure the title rights as main sponsor to the ABSA Premier Soccer League (PSL), as well as the broadcaster SuperSport, which invests significant amounts annually (up to R1.6bn) to secure international sports broadcasting rights for the ABSA PSL games (KickOff 2011).

Soccer as a niche market is described as one of the most popular sports globally (Koo 2009:1; Richelieu, Lopez & Desbordes 2008:32; Stolt 2010:4). It is the preferred sport with regard to media attention and audience reception (Horne & Manzenreiter 2002:195; Stolt 2010:4). This is particularly evident in Europe where every year millions of passionate spectators invest time, energy and money in supporting their favourite clubs (Schomburg 2015:24). In South Africa too, soccer is arguably the most popular sport, recreationally and economically, as regards attracting spectators (Dubihlela, Dhurup & Surujlal 2009:155; Anon 2018).

In most of the European countries, soccer is largely ahead of the other sports, when it comes to attendance, news generated in sport magazines, sport journals or generalist journals. The finances connected to this sport in clubs such as Manchester United, which realised €46.4m income in 2004–2005, or Real

Madrid that realised €275.7m income in the same season have elevated these clubs to the status of companies, resulting in them becoming more than just soccer clubs (Mays 2012:2). In South Africa, large clubs such as Orlando Pirates and Kaizer Chiefs from the ABSA PSL have managed to secure a deal for broadcasting rights over 3 years for R110m (Solberg 2008:2), making them competitive with European clubs. Recently, ABSA PSL sponsorship income had grown from R119.9m in 2007 to R239.9m in 2011 (PSL Financial Report 2011:57). Further contributions to market and promote ABSA PSL soccer matches from 2014 to 2017 come from South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) with the amount of R1376bn (www.thesouthafrican.com). Traditionally, broadcasters got into long-term deals to cover sporting events for a number of years. Today, the demand for owning rights to showcase sporting events has grown so much that these deals have become seasonal. It makes it easier for rights owners to dictate prices and move to the highest bidder at any given time.

Consequently, the soccer industry is now an international business; international professional competitions are established, players are transferred all over the world and the European Championship finals and Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) World Cup finals are top media events with global television coverage (Fallahi, Asad & Khabiri 2011:159). The increased globalisation of sport is of great significance to African soccer in general, because this phenomenon has made it easier to buy, scout for and invest in human capital (Solberg 2008:2). Although the current, very challenging economic times are problematic, there is a continued revenue growth in European soccer, illustrating the ongoing loyalty of spectators and the constant appeal of this sport to sponsors and broadcasters (Garcia 2008:3). In South Africa, the commercialisation of soccer has resulted in an increase in revenue with other sponsors wanting to invest their capital in the ABSA PSL.

While the finances of professional soccer clubs have increased massively in terms of revenue (Koo 2009:1; Schomburg 2015:1), the spectators, among others, have experienced important changes in the cultural organisation of the sport (Giulianotti & Robertson 2004:545). A change of culture frequently occurs along with certain traditions being lost by clubs that have been commercialised (Krabbenbos 2013:2). Furthermore, Krabbenbos (2013:2) explains the interesting situation in soccer where the minority of clubs are owned by their supporters. In these so-called membership clubs, the ownership is spread between a large number of spectators. Consequently, the spectators at these clubs have an important influence on how the club is commercialised. Literature supports this: studies by Immamovic (2010:173) and Bodet and Bernache-Assolant (2011:783) describe the value of spectators from these sport clubs as being essential and contributing to the development of the sport.

Sport spectating is one of the most popular leisure activities with the spectators representing the largest proportion of the sport industry (Kim 2008:13). According to Chao (2010:5),

these spectators are a group of consumers who support the popularity of a team. They are, in many instances, fanatical about the performance and success of their team (Gerber & Terblanche 2012:75). Wilkins (2012:73) and Gerber and Terblanche (2012:75) mentioned factors such as eustress, self-esteem, escape, entertainment, aesthetics, group affiliation and family needs as components of the motivation that leads to attendance at sports events. Understanding the factors that influence spectator attendance is fundamental to understanding decisions about sport consumption (Gerber & Terblanche 2012:75; Kruger, Saayman & Ellis 2010:91–92). Spectator attendance at sport events represents a significant revenue stream for sports venues and sports associations, with subsequent benefits for cities or regions, and is estimated to be worth millions (Hall et al. 2009:2). This is not surprising because sports marketing revenue comes from ticket sales, while sponsorship revenue depends on how popular and well attended the given sport or team game is (Kim & Trail 2010:190).

This holds true for South Africa, where popular soccer teams such as Orlando Pirates, Kaizer Chiefs and Sundowns have a large following and spectator base (Feinberg 2010). The major difference between these clubs may be in their brand value (Koo 2009:2). One of the main disadvantages of increasing commercialism is the alienation of soccer spectators. As a result of these changes, supporters can often no longer identify with their soccer club and a consequent lack of satisfaction among them starts to develop (Krabbenbos 2013:2). Kennedy and Kennedy (2012:327) write that spectators have been very resistant to the commercialisation of soccer. Because of the advent and increasing dominance of commercialisation within the soccer industry, spectators have seen their soccer clubs transform from traditional community clubs into corporate business organisations. As a result, they, the spectators, as mentioned above, have difficulty in identifying with their club and become dissatisfied. Thus, it can be stated that while studies reveal dissatisfaction with commercialisation (Crompton 2014:420), they also indicate that loyalty programmes, which involve benefits and incentives, could foster loyalty to the clubs.

Studies on loyalty mentioned that satisfaction with club games has been referred to as an antecedent of the spectators, behavioural intentions and their emotions experienced during the matches, service quality, team brand associations, commitment, brand identification, perceived value, customer relationship, trust, customer retention, waiting time and dependability are loyalty consumption-related aspects often mentioned as having a direct or indirect role (i.e. *via* satisfaction) in increasing spectators' behavioural intentions (Abeza, O'Reilly & Reid 2013:120; Baker & Jones 2011:52; Biscaia et al. 2013:14–25, 20–32; Choi et al. 2009:268; Dagger, David & Ng 2011:273; Haghkhah et al. 2013:159; Kotler & Armstrong 2014:27; Kuenzel & Halliday 2010:167; Lager 2008:30–330; Martin et al. 2008,22:224–236; Stavros, Pope & Winzar 2008:135; Toedt 2014:229; Van Vuuren, Roberts-Lombard & Van Tonder 2012:96; Van Vuuren et al. 2012:96;

Wu, Tsai & Hung 2012:180; Yoshida & James 2010:338; Zhao, Hou & Gilbert 2014:296).

Research (Gerber & Terblanche 2012:75; Howard & Crompton 2005:32; Immamovic 2010:189–246; Kim & Trail 2010:192; Kruger et al. 2010:91–92; Yoshida & James 2010:338) has identified several factors such as prizes, inclement and deterrent weather before and during the event, lack of resources and access, time conflict between the professional tournament and everyday life activities, inconvenience, lengthy distance to travel to the event, poor player performance, seating and difficulty in finding parking as constraints and challenges faced by managers that impact on spectator attendance at the games.

Research by Douvis (2014:42) indicated that a game's attractiveness and audience preference are positively related to attendance of a game. Furthermore, promotion and income have consistently been found to be positively related to game attendance, while ticket price, substitute forms of entertainment, the television effect as well as competition from other sport events have been found to be negatively related to game attendance (Douvis 2014:44). In order to sustain the growth of soccer clubs, it is vital to acknowledge the importance of spectators and understand the factors that foster their loyalty to specific soccer clubs in order to manage this process and overcome the challenges.

Main problems to be investigated

For any sporting event to be successful and profitable, it not only needs sport respondents but also spectator attendance (Drapper & Coalter 2016:49; Huang, Lee & Hou 2009:80; Stander & Van Zyl 2016:2; Tichaawa & Harila 2016:797–798). Developing and maintaining a long-term relationship with spectators, independently from team performance, is important for their loyalty to and management of the clubs. South Africa has a unique situation pertaining to loyalty to soccer clubs where aspects such as the economic environment of spectators, the high unemployment rate in the country, transport issues and various other aspects all play a role. Sport managers need to understand what motivates spectators to attend sporting events and what hinders them from attending the games (Drapper & Coalter 2016; Huang et al. 2009:80; Stander & Van Zyl 2016:2; Tichaawa & Harila 2016:797–798) in order to establish a successful long-term relationship. No information or guidelines in the South African context give guidance to the managers of these clubs, and therefore the question remains: What are the value of spectators to soccer clubs, the loyalty factors contributing to this loyalty and the challenges faced by managers in the quest to gain loyal spectators?

Methodology

To achieve the objectives of the study, a descriptive paradigm was used, employing a qualitative research design. This study was carried out following a multiple case study approach. In the case of this study, qualitative research was conducted

to obtain relevant information from the senior management of the nine clubs with regard to the aspects of loyalty, the role of spectators within the clubs and the challenges faced by club managers to gain loyal spectators. During face-to-face interviews which lasted for one and a half hours, the senior management were assured that the answers they provide are confidential and to be used for the purpose of this study as a means of ensuring trustworthiness and qualitiveness. Selecting these people was based on their relevance for the study and their status in the senior management. Each club session interview took place at a central location convenient for respondents. The same researcher was present during each of the club's meetings to keep and record data accurately and consistently. Notes were taken and all sessions were recorded. Respondents in the interview were informed about the aims and procedures of the study. Limitations of the study are that out of nine respondents only one was female and this cannot be regarded as a true representative of females. The nine clubs do not have the same financial injection and strength invested by the sponsors. An important limitation of this study is that even though the results may be representative of club managers with regard to spectators, generalisation of the findings in the wider context is limited. The results of the study also pertain only to soccer spectators, and therefore one cannot infer the findings to all sports spectators

Case study

The ABSA PSL is a national sports association responsible for administering the two professional soccer leagues in South Africa – the South African Premier Division and National First Division. The ABSA PSL was created following an agreement between the National Soccer League and the remnants of the National Premier Soccer League (NPSL). The company acts as a governing body and competition organiser. The ABSA PSL is affiliated to the South African Football Association (SAFA) but SAFA does not govern the ABSA PSL competitions. The National First Division (NFD) is the second-highest league of South African club soccer. Teams that are relegated from the ABSA PSL's organised divisions compete in the SAFA Second Division.

Research design and sample

The identification of the value of spectators, the aspects contributing towards loyalty as well as the challenges faced by the clubs could offer some insight into their management. In order to accomplish this, a qualitative research approach was followed by interviewing nine club managers. The managements of these clubs were selected on the basis of their experience in this environment and their work and understanding of marketing. The ABSA PSL consists of 16 clubs. Nine were selected because of their popularity and average performance in the ABSA PSL.

A qualitative approach (rather than a quantitative methodology) was chosen because it would provide richer data that are more appropriate for this research (Rahman 2016:102). Each club session interview took place at a central

location convenient for respondents. Each interview was scheduled in advance, with confirmed dates. Collected data were transcribed into text and presented in narrative form, after which this was analysed by using Creswell's six steps in data analysis and interpretation.

Guidelines for the interviews

Structured interviews are usually adopted in multiple case studies to ensure structure and guarantee that the questions are detailed and developed in advance, for example as in a research survey (Nieuwenhuis 2008:47). The interview schedule comprised two parts. The first was intended to collect the demographic information of these managers, considering their gender, age range and duration in their current position in the clubs. The second part consisted of questions that were structured to gather in-depth information on three main aspects: the value of loyal spectators, current management practices in fostering loyalty and challenges inhibiting loyalty to soccer clubs. The questions were formulated based on the research of Agbor (2011) and Chao (2010) as found in the literature. The instrument was pre-tested for usability and clarity in a pilot study carried out at smaller clubs in the North West province of South Africa.

Data analysis

Based on the responses of the respondents, follow-up questions were formulated as appropriate. Interviews were audiotaped, transcribed and, subsequently, further analysed by the authors. The researchers employed the following six steps as suggested by Creswell (2009:175–177):

- *Organise and prepare the data.* This included organising the data as well as the transcriptions of the recorded interviews and preparing them for analysis. Research was also conducted by employing content analysis utilising the search results of numerous scholarly journals that have conducted research on spectators of sport clubs, in order to obtain background regarding the management of such clubs.
- *Read through all the data.* During this step, the data were read through several times in order to obtain a general sense of the information.
- *Begin a detailed analysis with a coding process.* The data were coded in order to identify the important aspects. Thereafter, a recode process was followed by the authors in order to ensure trustworthiness. The results were then compared with one another in order to gain an overall perspective.
- *Use the coding process to generate a description of the setting or people as well as categories or themes for analysis.* The various codes were then divided into categories, after which themes were allocated to each category. The allocated themes appear as the major findings in the results and were used to create headings in the findings section of this study.
- *Advance how the description and themes will be represented in the qualitative narrative.* A discussion follows, mentioning

the chronology of the importance of the themes identified. This step conveys descriptive information about each given theme and the information identified by each respondent.

- *A final step in data analysis involves interpreting or making meaning of the data.* Lastly, personal interpretation and understanding were formulated with regard to the results gained from this research.

Trustworthiness is an indication of methodological soundness and adequacy (Holloway & Wheeler 2010). For this research, trustworthiness was illustrated by means of coding and recoding the data and testing it against results found in literature.

Ethical considerations

Issues of confidentiality were taken into consideration, and the respondents were assured that data would be kept confidential and that their names would not be mentioned. Ethical approval was obtained (ethical clearance number: EMS 2016/11/04/-02/28) through the ethical process of the university.

Results and discussions

The results based on the survey that was conducted follow.

The demographics characteristics of the club managers

The first part of the questionnaire was developed to capture the information regarding the demographic details of the club managers and included the following characteristics as presented in Table 1.

From Table 1, it is clear that the ABSA PSL clubs appoint more men than women to be their marketing managers. With regard to the age difference, there are more marketing managers (6) in the category 30–40 years compared to the categories 20–30 years (1), 40–50 years (1) and 50–60 years (1). What is interesting to note from Table 1 is that every marketing manager has attained at least a post-matric qualification,

which puts them in a stronger position, even though some of them do not possess relevant marketing qualifications.

Results of the management aspects

The second part of the questionnaire focused on the main objective of this study, that is, to assess the importance of spectators based on the perceptions of the managers as regards the *value of the spectators*, the current management practices in *fostering loyalty* as well as the *challenges* faced by managers of soccer clubs. Managers were asked to indicate their perceptions of these issues. Referring to the fourth step of Creswell's (2009) guidelines, the various factors that were mentioned by the managers were categorised and allocated to themes.

Value of spectators

In conducting the interviews with the nine managers of the soccer clubs, four themes were identified with regard to the value of spectators: *commercial value*, *partnership value*, *marketing value* and *spiritual shareholders value*. These themes were based on previous research that gives guidance in terms of spectator values. Value themes were also developed based on the primary context of the elements as part of the specific group.

Respondents were asked if their teams value the importance of having spectators; the following supporting statements were made by the respondents (presented as 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9).

From Table 2, it is clear that all the respondents regarded spectators as valuable partners in the success and the growth of their teams (Douvis 2014:48; Misener & Doherty 2012:243).

Theme 1: Commercial value: Within the theme of commercial value, constructs such as tickets, merchandise and club membership were mentioned (respondents 1, 2, 3, 4 and 7). Respondents 1 and 4 highlighted the importance of commercial value in maintaining a successful sports club by stating that 'it will make a vast difference to budgets and it would help the management to run the club even better'. This could be considered as the second most important theme

TABLE 1: The demographic characteristics of the club managers.

Demographics	Gender	Age	Occupation	Education
Respondent 1	Male	29	Media and Marketing Manager	Diploma in Journalism and Media
Respondent 2	Male	34	Marketing Manager	BCom in Information Sciences
Respondent 3	Male	43	Marketing and Public Relations Manager	BEd Hons in Education
Respondent 4	Female	44	Marketing Director and Sales	
Respondent 5	Male	58	Marketing Manager	Diploma in Communication and Marketing
Respondent 6	Male	45	Public Relations Officer	Master in Business Administration
Respondent 7	Male	41	Chairman	B Juris LLB Higher Diploma in Company Law Higher Diploma in Taxation Law Postgraduate diploma in Cyber Law Certificate in Management
Respondent 8	Male	40	General Manager	FIFA/Sport Management
Respondent 9	Male	46	Marketing Manager	Diploma in Marketing Diploma in Sport Management

LLB, Bachelor of Law.

TABLE 2: Responses of respondents towards the value of spectators.

Respondents	Factors contributing to theme	Identified theme
1, 2, 3, 4, 7	Tickets Merchandise Club membership	Commercial value
2, 3, 4, 5, 7	Media Sponsors Companies	Partnership value
6	Word of mouth Ambassadors Advertisement	Marketing value
1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9	Connection/attachment to team Quality of soccer Performance of players Community growth Generations immemorial/emotional position Motivate success	Spiritual shareholder value

indicated by the respondents, based on their reaction to the importance of spectators buying tickets, merchandise and being part of the club.

This is supported in studies undertaken by Mullin et al. (2007:22) and by Xu (2015:14) which suggest that one of the main goals of sport is to build and market an event in such an appealing way that sport or club marketers will convince their target consumers to buy into the event, either live (e.g. by attending the match) or via the media (e.g. watching the match on television), both of which indicate the *commercial value* of the spectators.

Theme 2: Partnership value: Shank (2005:12), Misener and Doherty (2012:245) and Xu (2015:1) further emphasised that to reap the benefits of a loyal consumer base, the interests of the three types of consumers identified as spectators, respondents and corporate business are critical in the growth and the development of the team, which could result in sponsorships built on these partnerships.

It could be argued that theme 2, *partnerships*, could be included with theme 1 that focuses on commercial value for the club. However, these partnerships do not only contribute financially to the club but also motivate an emotional connection (respondents 4 and 5). Sponsors invest in soccer clubs that provide greater mileage in return for an investment (Misener & Doherty 2012:243; Shank 2005:12; Xu 2015:3). Companies today associate themselves with clubs which have a huge spectator base, and which give them the opportunity to sell their products. The products might be merchandise and information which can be derived from newspapers or television. The soccer game which spectators attend can also be referred to as a product because they come to the game to 'consume' it (figuratively speaking) or enjoy themselves. The game of soccer involves many aspects such as owners of the clubs who will invest in the team in order to be successful. In the same vein, agents will use the opportunity to manage players' contracts so that they themselves (the agents) are in turn able to benefit (Misener & Doherty 2012:243; Shank 2005:12; Xu 2015:3).

Theme 3: Marketing value: As part of the literature investigating respondents, Xu (2015:3), Fullerton (2010:36) and O'Reilly, Graham and Rennie (2013:1–3) consider that sport marketing consists of three subsystems: the media, the

sponsors and the spectators. The relationship between these three subsystems is symbiotic as they collaborate in order to attract additional spectators to a sporting event (Fullerton 2010:36; O'Reilly et al. 2013:1–3; Xu 2015:3). Respondents 6, 2, 3 and 7 confirm this sentiment by stating that spectators play an *ambassadorial role*, they are foot soldiers, they deal by *word of mouth* and they effectively *advertise* for the club. The interviewee stressed that these spectators are referred to as the 'each one teach one' kind of people.

For example, the media supply the amount of coverage needed, as determined by the interest level of the spectators, as well as the level of credibility that the sponsors can afford. Furthermore, sponsors provide financial support to the sport organisation, dependent upon the level of spectator interest as well as the available media partnership. Lastly, the level of spectator support for a sport organisation may influence the number of sponsors attracted to the club (Xu 2015:3), which therefore supports the first and second themes identified.

Theme 4: Spiritual shareholder value: It is clear from the interviews that the value added by spectators to a team or sport club is very important. All the respondents accept this; respondent 3 indicated it as the most important role of spectators in terms of a soccer sport club in South Africa. They highlighted factors such as *connection* or *attachment* to the team (respondents 4 and 5), influencing the *quality* and *performance* of the players of the soccer being played (Respondents 1, 2, 8 and 9), motivation to success for both management and players (Respondent 2), *emotional connection* that add to the brand (Respondent 4), loyal older people from *generations immemorial* adding value by attracting family and friends (Respondent 6), *spiritual stakeholders* with great influence (Respondent 7) and soccer spectators could influence the community to grow (Respondent 8).

These factors were also indicated by Yoshida and James (2010:338) as well as Martínez, Ko and Martínez (2010:502) who stated that the quality of the game is an important aspect of attracting spectators to the games.

Aspects of spectator loyalty

Respondents were asked whether their teams promote aspects of loyalty. These aspects differ from the traditional loyalty aspects mentioned in literature, such as commitment (Ruyruen & Miller 2007:21); customer satisfaction (Roberts-Lombard 2009:413); customer retention (Khan 2012:107); and trust, building pride and spiritual connection (Costabile 2000:77–78; Gommans, Krishnan & Scheffold 2001:50).

It was clear to the researcher that the respondents did not perceive loyalty aspects in the same way as that indicated in the literature; in addition, their responses explained aspects that foster spectators' loyalty towards the soccer clubs and teams.

One could divide the factors mentioned by the respondents into sub-themes such as incentives, benefits, discounts and

additional services, but in essence these boil down to tangible benefits in the form of discount tickets (Respondents 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7); transport to the match (Respondents 3, 5 and 7); accommodation discounts near the stadium as an incentive (Respondent 3); clothing discounts (Respondents 3 and 7); other incentives such as funeral plans, legal policies and airtime as a member of the club (Respondents 4, 5 and 9).

The results demonstrate that to a large extent, all clubs believe that the spectators do benefit from their teams; in consequence, *information is shared with spectators and the clubs are able to market their teams through playing good soccer* (respondents 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9). According to the literature, Yoshida and James (2010:338) mentioned that satisfaction is found by creating an exciting game and atmosphere which positively influences spectators to return for future events. Thus, sport spectators become more concerned about pleasure, enjoyment and their experience of a positive feeling about the game. This research has found that the South African managers focus on influencing the atmosphere and the loyalty of the spectators and of the match by providing benefits, incentives and additional services to create satisfaction and a memorable experience. This supports the research by Martínez et al. (2010:502), which states that professional sports organisations should offer high-quality sports spectating products or services to attract more sport spectators to the games.

These results could also add to the sentiments expressed by Couvelaere and Richelieu (2005:24) and Yoshida and James (2010:338) that indicated physical facilities and other elements (such as in this study) could enhance the experience and help create a feeling of belonging to the team, thereby contributing to the development of a sports team brand.

The challenges facing Amalgamated Banks of South Africa Premier Soccer League clubs

In conducting the interviews with the nine managers of the soccer clubs, five themes were identified with regard to the *challenges* managers faced concerning loyalty, which were grouped as *absence of heroes, economic climate, safety and security, marketing* and *public relations*.

The following challenges regarding loyalty were mentioned by the respondents:

Challenge 1: Absence of heroes: According to the respondents (5 and 7), the current players do not play entertaining soccer; as a result, they do not attract spectators to the games. A lack of heroes or iconic players is a huge concern for managers of the soccer clubs. The indications from the respondents (4 and 5) are that there are no longer iconic players loved by spectators who attract spectators to the clubs because of them. Respondents (2, 3, 4, 5 and 6) mentioned that spectators will attend a game that is exciting and produces winning results. Wann et al. (2001:2) assert that the value of sport spectating lies in the fact that spectators are interested in sport and as a result spend a considerable amount of money to actively follow a sport, team and/or athlete. Sport spectators who perceive a high-quality relationship

with a team or athlete will invest more time and money in the team by attending games and purchasing licensed products (Williams & Chinn 2010:423). Individual players are often major drawcards to lure spectators. For instance, Real Madrid paid Manchester United €94m for the purchase of Cristiano Ronaldo (Hughes 2009:1).

Challenge 2: Economic climate: Most spectators make sacrifices so as to be able to attend and support their clubs even though they are unemployed. According to the respondents (3, 8 and 9), many of the spectators are unable to renew their club memberships when these expire because of the lack of money. According to the literature, in South Africa, the enormous economic challenges resulting from unemployment and high levels of poverty (Segalo 2011:229) impact on the extent to which society supports sport. Although South Africans are challenged by the said socio-economic factors, the popularity of soccer is visible in the township streets where it is a common boys' game (Alegi & Bolsmann 2013:8), while people nevertheless try to attend the soccer games despite these challenges.

Challenge 3: Safety and security: It was also mentioned by respondents 1, 2, 4 and 5 that the games played at night posed risks to the spectators' lives. Safety and security has been identified as one of the five global forces that will drive the sports tourism industry in the new millennium. George (2003:575) and Du Plessis, Saayman and Van der Merwe (2017:1) found that if individuals feel a particular destination is either risky in terms of safety or security, they are most likely to develop a negative impression about the place, resulting in avoiding it. Attendance of games at night for spectators therefore becomes a huge risk.

Challenge 4: Marketing: All of the respondents (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9) indicated that marketing (including television and technology) is not properly addressed by their clubs; as a result, this impacts on attendance and the recruitment of spectators. The respondents also stated that sponsors find it difficult to sponsor clubs as there are competing needs. From a marketing management perspective, it is important that spectators are taken into consideration because they are able to profit significantly (Douvis 2014:50–51; Johnston 2004:21). A key question facing sport marketing management is how to develop, maintain and grow loyalty, not just among successful sporting clubs but also among teams with inferior or poor results (Douvis 2014:52; Johnston 2004:21). The main goal of the marketing function of a club should be to develop and maintain relationships with spectators, as well as to boost the popularity of the game (Handley 2012:22; Samra & Wos 2014:263). Spectators should be treated as club stakeholders: their needs to belong to a club, to express their views and opinions about a club as well as to be acknowledged as spectators of a club's games should all be satisfied.

Challenge 5: Public relations: Most of the respondents (2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9) mentioned that although they provide corporate social investment (CSI) projects to communities,

loyalty programmes are not necessarily implemented by the clubs, which they must introduce to spectators. While sport clubs are not as advanced with regard to the loyalty learning curve as some sectors, such as airlines with their Frequent Flyer Points or supermarkets and fuel companies and their loyalty programmes, there has been significant progress in this area (Johnston 2004:21). Major clubs in the United States, Britain as well as South Africa (Bester 2010:186) now run loyalty programmes (Lundmark 2017:5). Good customer loyalty programmes not only improve consumer acceptance that is reflected in increased sales but also encourage participation through increased interaction between the business and customer (Ou et al. 2011:195–196). It is therefore critical that all soccer clubs in South Africa implement loyalty programmes to attract a significant number of spectators to support their teams.

Findings and recommendations

The first finding highlights the four identified themes of the value of spectators to soccer clubs in South Africa: *commercial value, partnership value, marketing value and spiritual shareholder value*. Although similar themes and factors have been identified in the literature, these themes and factors differ from those of other soccer clubs in the world, indicating the uniqueness of South Africa as a destination and also the unique spectator base. This finding also demonstrates that spectators are regarded as valuable partners (Xu 2015:5) in the success and the growth of their club. Therefore, managers should determine the value of spectators to their clubs and capitalise on this in order to manage their club successfully. The former should be able to provide goods and services to attract spectators in order to grow and sustain the clubs. They should use the knowledge regarding spectators in order to build a brand that instils trust, identification, value, commitment, quality and satisfaction. This will aid in generating additional revenues through the sale of a variety of goods and services.

The second finding highlights the different views that the managers of soccer clubs express in terms of loyalty aspects. South African club managers foster loyalty by providing benefits, incentives, discounts and additional services to spectators. This is unique to the South African context which emphasises the importance of the needs of spectators in the creation of loyalty. Management indicated that different aspects come into play in South Africa when cultivating the loyalty of spectators. For sustaining or even enhancing loyalty, marketers need to be market focused and be aware of their customers' preferences in order to build such a relationship as that of lifetime partners and should attempt to understand their changing wants, desires and values.

The third finding highlights the challenges faced by managers in sustaining loyalty to their clubs, which in essence threaten the sustainability of the club. Themes that were identified were *absence of heroes, economic climate, safety and security,*

marketing and public relations. It is clear that the quality of the game, players, facilities and management, value for money and the overall experience of the spectators are of utmost importance to gain a competitive advantage. It is obvious that the first and main objective of soccer clubs is to make money, but it could be assumed from the results that for the South African spectator the objective is much more about the game and the heroes. This could be because their frame of reference to the sport differs from international clubs. Therefore, managers of clubs should invest in identifying the constraints of potential spectators and developing strategies to reduce those constraints and challenges in order to create loyal spectators, which in the end will provide the income for the clubs.

The last finding highlights the importance of soccer in South Africa but it was also clear that it should be managed differently because of the spectators that are regarded as valuable partners in the success and the growth of their club. Furthermore, sponsors invest in soccer clubs that provide mileage in return as an investment. It was indicated that airtime was important to spectators, and companies such as Vodacom and Mobile Telephone Network (MTN) could capitalise on this information by providing incentives to spectators at a particular game. Therefore, managers of clubs need to go beyond their status as mere sports teams and establish themselves as brands in their own right.

Conclusions

This study is the first of its kind where a critical analysis was performed with regard to the importance of spectators, in terms of their value, loyalty and challenges faced by managers, applied to the sport context in South Africa. It is clear that the South African soccer scenario is unique in comparison with global soccer clubs. It is perceived as an important recreational outlet for the majority of the population of South Africa. In order to sustain this and foster the sport of soccer, it is important for managers of soccer clubs to adapt to the daily changes of spectators needs, views and perceptions towards the sport.

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Competing interests

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Authors' contributions

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