AN EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS OF PRODUCT AND PLACE MARKETING FACTORS IN ALBANIAN FOOTBALL MARKET

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Abstract

The game of football has always created interest and debate not only among fans but also in various fields recently. Defined as the beautiful game and for its multidimensional importance, the game of football has an irreplaceable role in this industry not only for the fans inside the stadium but also those outside it. Undoubtedly, in order for the football product to become more beautiful and attractive, it is necessary that the stadium where the game takes place must to be unique and emotionally place for the sports fans. Through this paper we can understand that the role of the football product and the importance of the stadium are extremely important for influencing the fans to support their team in the stadium. Using a national representative sample of football fans (N=800), we use exploratory factor analysis to analyze product and price marketing factors, thus testing constructs that define football consumption behavior. The analysis results in five factors relating, which are later brought down to the strategic context of Albanian football market. We further use MANOVA to examine difference between typical groups to draw key conclusions.

Keywords: Football consumption, marketing, product, place

INTRODUCTION

One of the most influential factors in following sports events in stadiums is the performance of the club or as it is otherwise called the beautiful game (Branscombe & Wann, 1991). Winning has traditionally been the main factor in filling stadiums which increases the perception of the game entertainment (Hart et al., 1975), although other factors have recently become important ingredients for sports organizations and their value. Usually professional football clubs come together to produce a product for the league where it is first intended to provide entertainment for the spectators and then the interested parties (Mason, 1999).

Generally, the football product in the function of the Liga, can be purchased from local, regional, national and international broadcasting media. This environment makes the marketing of professional football leagues more complex and offers a high profit margin. From this point of view leagues and clubs tend to constantly generate new sources of profit. The peculiarity of the football product, as in other sports, lies in the fact that not recognizing the outcome of the match has a profound effect on the emotional state and motivating factors of the fan.

Distribution is the third most important factor in mix marketing and refers to the place where the football game (stadium) originates and begins to distribute the product in different geographical areas according to the target markets which can be national or global (Schwarz & Hunter, 2008). Place in modern football means that fans can go to the stadium and become part of the production and consumption of the product in real time (Westerbeek & Shilbury, 1999). The concept of stadium atmosphere means that the environment or the place has specific qualities that influence spectators. For fans in modern times, football has the features of a religion where their impulses, rituals and beliefs are best expressed only in the stadiums as well as believers when performing their religious rituals in holy places according to their affiliation (Bale, 1994).

From the point of view of sports marketing, the special atmosphere which is created in football stadiums is one of the most important reasons why people participate in these sporting events (Bauer et al., 2005). For many football clubs based on different football championship building a stadium is a vital challenge. In Albania this scenario changed with the construction of the national stadium "Air Albania", where the impact and the importance was verified since the firsts matches that took place arousing interest in Albania championship clubs, mainly in the main football division "Kategoria Superiore".

In Albania football this scenario changed with the construction of the national stadium, where the impact and importance were clearly seen in the first matches that took place at the end of 2019 for the eliminators of EURO 2020 against L'equipe de France de Football arousing interest in Albanian championship clubs, mainly in the "Kategoria Superiore". The topic of

stadiums has received special attention around itself, forcing the Albanian government to engage in their construction for the most important regions in the country.

The aim of this study is to understand the reveal the underlying effects of these product and place marketing factors in influencing football fans to support their club in the stadium based on Albanian championship. Further we purpose to explore differences in these factors between various relevant groups.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The quality of the product influences the creation of a special atmosphere where the fans express all their emotions that flow from the match (Scelles et al., 2011). According to the importance, we can mention the adrenaline that offer a derby where two clubs of the same city face each other like "El Clasico" in Spain or Partizani vs Tirana in the context of Albania championship. Undoubtedly this product has a different importance and taste compared to other matches, crossing the boundaries of a football match. In this match, the emotion of the respective players and fans is always special, which is a unique marketing opportunity for the entire champions and clubs.

Over the years, the football product has amplified gradually becoming interdependent with other components equally important and making the beautiful game more spectacular and unique in the eyes if their fans. For marketers, the game of football remains the core product of this sport which however needs to be played in particular places full of emotions called stadiums. The importance of the stadium has been always a permanent phenomenon, dates back to ancient Rome, where horse-drawn carriages were followed by spectators at the Circo Massimo with a capacity of 250 000 spectators (Guttmann, 1986).

The concept of stadium atmosphere means that the environment or place has e specific qualities that influence spectators. However, the literature on the effects of stadium atmosphere based on consumer behavior has not received enough attention from researchers (Uhrich & Benkenstein, 2010). One factor that determines supporters' satisfaction and readiness of the fans by recommending and returning to the stadium is the recreational atmosphere inside and outside it (Wakefield & Blodgett).

Fans tend to have experience in new stadiums and mostly equipped with the latest technology around it (Dinnie, 2008). For football marketers, the atmosphere of the stadium which must prevail to make the experience of the unique fans remains one of the most important challenges. For many football clubs the construction of a stadium and the number of seats is an important strategy (Gómez-Gónzales et al., 2016) however its design is an art that requires time and effort to be implemented (Dhurup et al., 2010). At the same time, these

structures require marketers who have the ability to ensure their functioning, making it possible to guaranteeing the highest possible profits for the finances of clubs not only from the football game but also from other activities. The issue of stadium has a valuable interest in Albanian football due to the fact that few of them ret in the final stages of construction and others are expected to begin. To better understand the combination of these two variables of the mix marketing we will try to make a reflection briefly as follows.

In order to offer a product with high value for the football fans, marketers need to understand and combine how the elements of the beautiful game change and affecting their market. In the football game a leading role has the type of the competition that the club is playing, despite the fact that all teams face the rivals to win every match. As the club manages to win points on playing during the championship, also the satisfaction will be higher (Barajas, 2014) affecting at the same time continuously the number of fans inside and outside the stadium.

From this point of view even media are inclined to pay attention to football and as a result motivate various sponsors and companies to invest in this industry (Madeiro, 2007). For achieving these goals, clubs must always make a difference compared with the opponents 'by scoring as many goals as possible to the credit of the attack that the club has (Boscá, et al., 2006). In football all players are involved simultaneously in the game, but the talent of a superstar is necessary to offer spectacle such assist, dribbling, passing the ball or scoring the goal (Framck & Nüesch, 2008). An important role in the quality of the football game has the coach as they prepare and motivate players of their team to increase the performance and the result of the club (van Kleef et al., 2018).

What makes the beautiful game such an attractive sector or business is the high value of its news related with different episodes in the green field (Boyle & Haynes, 2000). Media as an integral part of the sport try to spread news from a local to a national or international phenomenon (Coombs & Osborne, 2012) by radically changing the way of experience. From this point of view, media is piloting sport industry and specially the football product towards a common development, offering to the public an increasingly wide range of sports programs where each of them is characterized by its own style.

For marketers the distribution elements remain a weekly challenge, making it possible to combine them but also requiring the experience and satisfaction of the stadium to be repeated and to be special for each week. After that football clubs decide, the main question of where the stadium will be built remains a challenge for sport organizations. Based on the experience of Premier League, clubs have usually built their stadiums in those areas where the history of the club has its roots, so it is advisable for other clubs to rely on this experience, especially in those

cities where there are at least two clubs and one historical rivalry as usually happens in football. In Albania football championship, stadiums in addition to the fact that are owned by municipalities (with the exception of FK Partizani) are located within cities, in urban areas or in some cases outside cities.

Previous research suggests that providing high quality services is a prerequisite for making the experience of fans as easy as possible in the stadium, increasing by this way their loyalty and revenue for football club (Dale et al, 2005). An important element that affects the experience during the match is the visual view that depends on the position where the fan sits in the stadium. Marketers fix the prices based on bench positions in the stadium, and that why the ticket price in tribune are often very expensive.

The importance of security has become essential and affecting directly fan experience (Morris, 1991) as stadiums often in addition to entertainment turn into a arena of violence and insecurity. Especially for parents who want to go to the stadium with their children, the issue of safety is a topic that is not negotiable. During the last decade of the 20th century the problem of security was a main subject for all European football championship, especially in Premier League and Seria A.

Parking is an element that can positively or negatively affect the experience of the fan in the stadium. Parking is considered a tangible service by fans and spectators in terms of importance and perception of service quality (Balaji & Chakraborti, 2015). Fans do not prefer to spend their time looking for parking around the stadium and losing time from the start of the match (Wakefield & Blodgett, 1996). Marketers consider in their strategies the elements such as the weather in cases when the stadiums are half covered. Other elements that affect fans experience in the stadium are the day of the match where the weekend is preferred and the match schedule.

These elements are already influencing Albanian football as variable that affect the product and the place where the beautiful takes place, and is in the interest of the marketers to study and implementing them in the strategies of their clubs.

METHODOLOGY

The Albanian main league "Superliga" is composed of 10 football clubs. In order to conduct a representative study of the Albanian football market, it is essential to capture all their fans. This, as a result of a very different structure of this football clubs. Two of them, FK Tirana and FK Partizani, belonging to the capital city, are quite different from the rest, in terms of financing, stadium, attendance and history. Others, such as FK Skënderbeu, have been an emerging, and successful club, mainly due to its market-oriented business model. On the other hand, there are

publicly (largely) founded clubs which do not share much characteristics with other clubs, but still do participate in the league for some reason.

For the study, a questionnaire was composed using variables relating to product and place marketing factors. As presented, literature demonstrates a series of interesting variables to catch the effect of these marketing factors in the football market. The questionnaire included questions referring to product and place marketing factors, composed in five-point Likert scale (one = not important to five = very important). Of course, in order to capture differences, a demographic section and few general questions were included.

The development of the questionnaire included also input from several football club associates. Discussions with them on the purpose of the questionnaire and its content provided valuable feedback, especially in the relevance of the questions. Then, the questionnaire was initially tested with university students who were avid football fans or attended football matches. The questionnaire was piloted during a league match, which served to calibrate the instrument and carry on with the fieldwork phase. To avoid any surplus emotions that might bias the results, we limited the time of the conduction of the questionnaire only before the start of the match.

After the conduction of the interviews, we were able to collect 870 responses. However, 70 filled questionnaires had considerable deficiency, such as groups of unanswered questions, or even discovered patterns of providing the same answer for a large group of questions. Finally, our sample is composed of 800 interviews. The sample is spit into six age categories: 18 – 24 y.o. (27%); 25 – 34 y.o. (24%); 35 – 44 y.o. (12%); 45 – 54 y.o. (16%); 55 – 64 y.o. (16%); 65 y.o. and over (5%); showing slight inclination of younger ages to attend football matches. The sample is composed of almost all male (96%), while it resonates the absence of women in Albanian stadiums. Of course, there are multiple factors affecting this low attendance, and falling outside the scope of our paper will no be further discussed. However, to ensure proper understanding of the sample, it actually is representative of Albanian football fans (who attend matches at a stadium) – the low percentage of women in this sample is due to their low attendance (in many football matches there are no women attending at all). Some other sample profile information which will be used in our analysis includes: (i) 30% of the sample declare to attend every match (or almost every match); 33% to usually attend matches (2 - 3 times per month); 21% to sometimes attend matches (once a month); while 16% to rarely attend matches (once in two months or less); (ii) 3% of the sample declared not being a football fan of a particular team, but rather general football enthusiast, while the remaining were fans who identified themselves with a football club ; (iii) 25% of the sample includes fans who are part of an organized football fan club (ultras), while the rest are regular fans.

To identify patterns among product and place marketing factors, we use exploratory factor analysis (EFA). According to Fabrigar & Wegener (2011) EFA serves as a method to develop measurement instruments by determining the dimensionality of a set of measured variables and to determine the specific measured variables that best reflect the conceptual dimensions underlying the set of measured variables. We further use MANOVA, to discover possible differences between groups – age groups, fans grouped by stadium attendance as described above, and grouped by being part of an organized football fan club or not. Although all groups are over 30, the Box M test was conducted to ensure equality of variance between groups before MANOVA as the ration of the smallest and the largest group is more than 1.5.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the sample's descriptive statistics (mean and standart deviation) of each of the variables used to test product and place marketing factors. To create a better comprehension of the variables, we further provide explanation for some of them. "Type of game" refers whether the game that is played pertains to the league, the championship, or if it is a derby or a decisive game for their team. "Playing teams" refers to the perceived quality of the teams playing in the match. "Sports TV shows" refers to the coverage of the match in a sport TV show. The "condition of the stadium" includes the overall state of the stadium, the state of the seat, cleanness, etc. In Albania, there is a huge difference between the conditions of the stadiums, as some stadiums are modernized, but some others are at a very poor condition.

The descriptive data shows that "level of security in the stadium" (3.95) has the highest mean, followed by "condition of the stadium" (3.93) and "type of the game" (3.90). The high mean values of these variables suggest a considerable influence of the maintenance of the stadium on the decision to attend a match, and quite clearly the game type. On the other hand, "clubs press conferences" (1.93), "transportation to get to the match" (2.13) and "distance of the match from the fan's residency area" (2.31) have the lowest mean.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Std. Dev
Type of game	3.90	1.51
Ranking of their team in the league	3.52	1.56
Playing teams	3.83	1.48
Expected match quality	3.83	1.39

Players appearing in the match	3.08	1.53	
Coach of their team	2.33	1.48	Table 1...
Club press conferences	1.93	1.25	
Sports TV shows	2.75	1.53	
Distance of the match from the fan's residency area	2.31	1.50	
Name of the stadium	2.37	1.63	
Condition of the stadium	3.93	1.48	
The position of the seat in the stadium	3.17	1.57	
Level of security in the stadium	3.95	1.50	
Weather conditions	3.58	1.60	
Day of the match	3.42	1.60	
Match during the weekend	3.58	1.60	
Time of the match	3.32	1.61	
Transportation to get to the match	2.13	1.43	
Having parking near the stadium	2.49	1.60	

Using the Kaiser's criteria, only the factors having latent roots or eigenvalues greater than 1 are considered significant. Based on this criterion, the results produce five factors. The factors eigenvalues are, decreasingly: factor 1 (4.79), factor 2 (2.35), factor 3 (1.81), factor 4 (1.44) and factor 5 (1.21). The total variance explained by these factors is 61.00%, which according to Hair et al. (2018) is considered a satisfactory value, especially among social sciences. The Bartlett's Test of Sphericity shows significance at $p=0.00$ (Chi-Square= 4823.460, df=171). The KMO values is 0.82, above the cut-off point of 0.5, showing sampling adequacy and suitability for EFA.

Considering the nature of the resulted factors, we labeled them as follows (refer Table 2):

1. Set up (factor 1)
2. Primary product (factor 2)
3. Additional product (factor 3)
4. Environment (factor 4)
5. Accessibility (factor 5)

The "Set up", "Environment" and "Accessibility" factors relate to the place marketing factor. "Set up" includes a group of factors mostly composed by the match arrangements, day and time of

the match, whether a match is played during the weekend, as well as a more environmental factor, weather condition. Out of the loadings, playing the match during the weekend displays the highest coefficient, having so the highest influence of the factor. Specific day of the match and time of the match show high influence as well, while on the other hand weather conditions appear to have week impact out on the "Set up" factor.

The "Environment" factor consists of ambience characteristics of the stadium. Out of environmental components, condition of the stadium is the most important one, followed by level of security in the stadium. These results vividly resonate the Albanian context. The primitivity of the Albanian football market has left much of the stadiums in bad condition and a poorly regulated match security law lead to unsecure matches, where vulgarity and often violence get out of hand.

The "Accessibility" factor includes positional factors of the stadium, such as distance and additional logistic matters. It is interesting to notice that the distance of the match from the fan's residency is not as important as the transportation to that match. As most of the towns are small and have a quite accessible stadium, the trouble of going to a home match is minimal, however many somewhat "struggle" to go to away matches, and matches end up having football fans of the home team and only "ultras" of the away team. The results suggest that rather than the distance, more importantly the lack of transportation might fuel this issue.

The "Primary product" and "Additional product" factors relate to the product marketing factors. The "Primary product" factor includes the influence of the direct and immediate product of a match, such as composition of the match and the expected quality. The most important of the components is the playing teams, which is expected as in the majority of cases the quality is dependent on the teams participating in a match. The "Additional product" factor relates to secondary products of a match. Players appearing in the match, contrary to one's expectations is a secondary product and the least important of the groups, even of the sports TV shows. The issue here is that Albanian teams have hardly any "superstars". While there might be one or two such football players all season, they either are not consistent and become average the next season, or if some consistency is left they are sold to other leagues abroad. This contributes in a league filled of average (and below average players). So, the match is not that much about the players, their individual presence, but of the team, and the struggle of a group of average players trying to pull a good performance.

Table 2: Rotated factor loading matrix

	Factor 1 Set up	Factor 2 Primary Product	Factor 3 Additional Product	Factor 4 Environment	Factor 5 Accessibility
Weather conditions	0.570				
Day of the match	0.827				
Match during the weekend	0.851				
Time of the match	0.801				
Type of game		0.787			
Ranking of their team in the league		0.755			
Playing teams		0.813			
Expected match quality		0.708			
Players appearing in the match			0.632		
Trainer of their team			0.807		
Club press conferences			0.772		
Sports TV shows			0.740		
Condition of the stadium				0.836	
The position of the seat in the stadium				0.462	
Level of security in the stadium				0.828	
Distance of the match from the fan's residency area					0.646
Name of the stadium					0.438
Transportation to get to the match					0.799
Having parking near the stadium					0.712

We also include a deeper analysis on the differences of these factors considering some important groups such as: age, participation in an organized fan club (ultras) and frequency

of attendance in the stadium. As previously discussed, the sample is composed of a very small percentage of women for us to draw gender comparisons of the factors. Performing MANOVA between age groups, the results show strong statistical significance (Wilks' lambda 0.890, F 3.741) at the .00 level on all criteria, indicating that factors do differ between age groups.

Engaging ANOVA to explore these differences, the results show that at $p < 0.05$ these differences are only significant for the "Environment" factor and at $p < 0.10$ these differences are also significant for "Secondary product". The "Environment" factor displays a pattern between age groups, as older ages seemingly are more affected by it. Considering the construction of the factor, having both the condition of the stadium and the level of the security, there is also a very strong practical sense of these results.

Table 3: Univariate comparisons of factors by age groups

	Overall	18-24y.o.	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	F	p
Set Up	3.48	3.28	3.46	3.60	3.61	3.54	3.69	1.742	0.123
Primary Product	3.77	3.68	3.71	3.80	3.85	3.91	3.75	0.835	0.525
Secondary Product	2.52	2.44	2.45	2.42	2.65	2.75	2.38	2.903	0.064
Environment	3.68	3.41	3.41	3.74	4.03	3.99	4.23	10.331	0.000
Accessibility	2.32	2.42	2.41	2.30	2.21	2.22	2.12	1.574	0.165

Further, we test differences between those who are part of an organized football fan's groups (usually referred as ultras) and those who are not. Performing MANOVA between groups, the results show strong statistical significance (Wilks' lambda 0.874, F 22.823) at the .00 level on all criteria, indicating significant differences between groups. Using again ANOVA to explore these differences, only "Accessibility" does not significantly differ between the two groups (at $p < 0.05$).

The results show that, "Set up", "Primary product" and "Environment" have a higher mean for the fans who are not part of an ultras group, hence are more important to them. On the other hand, only the "Secondary product" has a higher mean for fans who are part of an ultras group. It is somehow expected that all factors will be more influencing to non-ultras than to ultras, as ultras have the tendency to follow their team even if they put up a disastrous performance and "play in the mud".

Table 4: Univariate comparisons of factors by participation in an organized fan club

	Overall	Part of a group	Not part of a group	F	p
Set Up	3.48	2.96	3.64	43.204	0.000
Primary Product	3.77	3.38	3.90	30.058	0.000
Secondary Product	2.52	2.72	2.46	8.259	0.004
Environment	3.68	3.10	3.88	66.901	0.000
Accessibility	2.32	2.33	2.32	0.012	0.912

Lastly, we explore differences between groups which attend the stadium at different frequencies (as described in the methodology section). Performing MANOVA between groups, the results show strong statistical significance (Wilks' lambda 0.881, F 6.766) at the .00 level on all criteria, indicating significant differences between groups. Conducting ANOVA, only "Secondary product" does not show significant differences between the four selected groups, while other factors significantly differ. In the "Set up" factor, those who attend every match (or almost) have the lowest mean of the factor, while other groups appear more affected by the factor. The same pattern, where the factor influences less those who attend every match, is also displayed at other factors, and differences between other groups means are less distant.

Table 5: Table 5: Univariate comparisons of factors by frequencies of attending

	Overall	Rarely	Sometimes	Usually	Every match	F	P
Set Up	3.48	3.58	3.83	3.65	3.00	17.436	0.000
Primary Product	3.78	3.76	3.97	3.99	3.41	12.669	0.000
Secondary Product	2.53	2.53	2.43	2.47	2.66	1.865	0.134
Environment	3.68	3.73	3.91	3.76	3.41	6.746	0.000
Accessibility	2.33	2.46	2.55	2.31	2.11	7.084	0.000

CONCLUSIONS

The exploratory analysis of the product and place marketing factors in Albania has produced some interesting results, which share the context of the Albanian football market. We provided 19 relevant variables, which through the analysis resulted in measuring five factors: "primary product"; "additional product"; "set up"; "environment" and "accessibility". The first two relate to

the product marketing factors, while the results show a distinction between the most immediate and tangible product and the secondary, less apparent one. The last three relate to the place marketing factors, and the result show a differentiation in three dimensions.

The match "set up" is an important marketing factor, with the slight inclination towards weekends. Few participating teams in the league, and lack of a variety of other competitions, is clearly facilitating matches on weekends, and it will most likely do in medium term. Considering "environment" two variables stand out: the stadium conditions and security. Both express the need for a more developed environment. The current one, being in most cases quite old and deteriorated will continue to be a problem. Further, "accessibility" looks more a matter of transportation rather than location. Strategically, this can be useful when teams have away games, as it is expected that organized transportation will enhance attendance.

"Primary product" besides concocting a more important dimension of the product, shows an interesting pattern oriented toward match quality. The participation of Albanian teams in European championships is clearly minimal, suggesting an overall low quality of Albanian football. However, the discussion on the improvement of football quality in Albania is a broad one and outside the scope of this study, but the result emphasizes the importance of quality of football as an important marketing factor. To support this, results for the "additional product" show weak importance of players appearing in a match, which suggest the need for quality players, and most importantly even "superstars".

We conclude that only the "environment" factor differs significantly between ages, as older ages are more influenced by a better environment. Significant differences are found between "regular" fans and "ultras", as regular fans are more impacted by the set up, primary product and environment, while ultras more by secondary product. Lastly, significant differences between factors are apparent when considering the attendance frequency, where those who attend every match (or almost every match) show a different pattern from the other groups (except for the "secondary product"), as frequent attenders are less influenced by the resulted factors.

The study is situated in a developing football market, with notable progress, but remaining significant challenges. One significant limitation we are fully aware of, is that the study does not include the fans who do not attend stadiums at all, but are however avid fans. Besides studying the marketing factors in the segment of fans who do attend, further studies should aim to include also those who do not attend, as both are influences by the marketing factors. Of course, this is one of the first pieces of research conducted for the Albanian football market, and we hope it will serve as a strong basis to the further provision of highly influential research and strategy.

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