

The Influence of Stadium Attributes on Stadium Loyalty Development within the Context of Saudi Arabia

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ABSTRACT

Although soccer has become vastly popular on a global scale as evident in the constant setup of new leagues and teams worldwide, there are critical issues that primarily regard attendance rates at live soccer matches. This is due to low attendance rates, specifically in comparison to the capacity of stadiums. Therefore, it is important to investigate factors and attributes that can potentially resolve such issues. Thus, this study investigates stadium attributes as predicting factors of stadium loyalty in Saudi Arabia. Especially in Saudi Arabia where soccer is considered as the national sport, with huge financial inflow towards soccer infrastructure, there remain the issues of low attendance rate and utilization of soccer stadiums. Thus, by theorizing constructs and related hypotheses based on the extant literature and further accessing them through SEM, we were able to prove not only the hypothesized relations, but also drew out the important implications for both the theoretical and practical domains in Saudi Arabia and countries of the Gulf region.

Keywords: Stadium Loyalty, Social Interaction, Entertainment Experience, Team Involvement

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Introduction

As the worldwide popularization of soccer has led to professional sports becoming an increasingly popular leisure activity on a global scale, it has resulted in the establishment of new leagues and teams providing soccer games for visitors and fans, with various options not only to spectate the event (e.g. soccer game) but also to partake in the overall experience — in all this, the sport venue plays a crucial role (Larson et al., 2011; McDonald et al., 2010). In the country under investigation, i.e. Saudi Arabia, where recently soccer has not only become very popular but has also been regarded as the national sport, and with some Saudi soccer players playing for European soccer clubs as well as the establishment of the Saudi Football Federation, there are certain issues within the soccer environment that need to be addressed, among which is the low attendance rate at stadiums across the country. For instance, with almost 25 soccer stadiums having an overall capacity of being able to host approximately 400,000 people per match (with the biggest stadium capable of hosting 67,000 people), only 9,146 people attend per match. Thus, it becomes critical to investigate what influences stadium attendance and how it can also contribute to the further popularization of the sport. Therefore, the main purpose of this paper is to examine what aspects contribute to a greater stadium's attendance, primarily because it has quite an influence on team revenues and remains one of the key areas in the sports management context. In addition, as the environment and the feelings it evokes in attendees that come to watch soccer games have received greater attention, there are still limitations when it comes to examining social attributes and what influence(s) it may have on stadium attendance rates. At last, such examinations have great practical implications for Gulf countries that highly invest in the development of soccer infrastructure, such that the results of this study could be generalized to them as well, considering the similarities in cultural, traditional, historical, and religious backgrounds.

Literature Review and Hypotheses

In this section of the study, the related literature that contributed to the establishment of the proposed research model (Figure 1) is discussed.

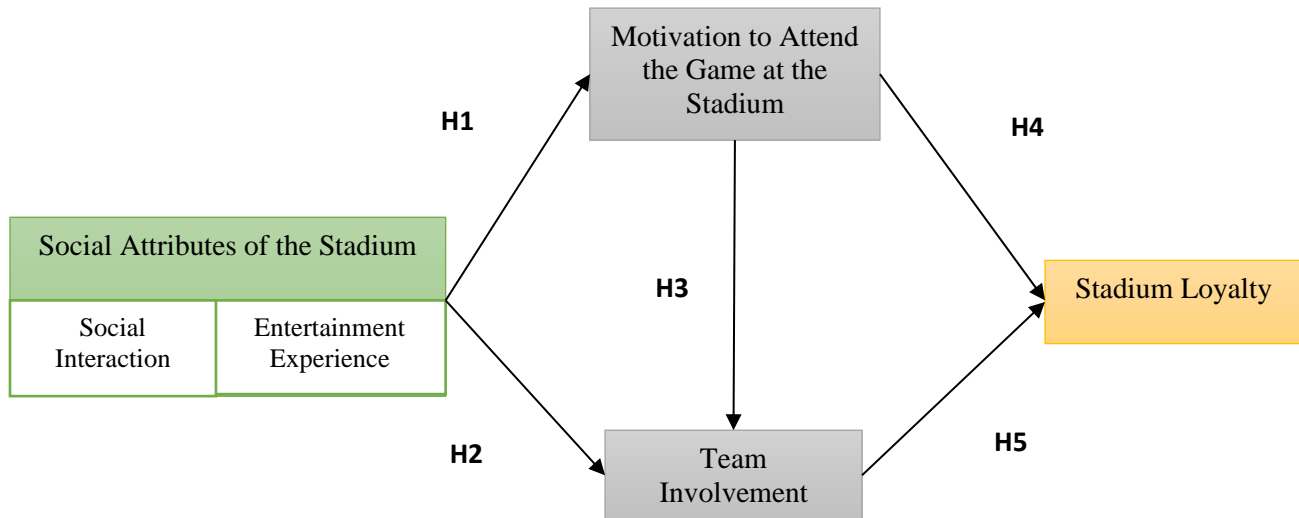


Figure 1. Proposed Research Model

Although the stadium by itself represents a physical environment that is easily grasped due to its tangible attributes such as layout and aesthetics, there are social attributes that, even though intangible, can be closely tied to the facility, as it accommodates them. Besides, such attributes like social interaction and entertainment experience have been empirically emphasized to be critical in establishing the stadium atmosphere along with the physical element of facility layout and interior (Balaji & Chakrabortu, 2013). For instance, the attribute of entertainment experience encompasses the core product and its related elements that are unique to the sport.

According to Mason (1999), the entertainment facet includes league, franchises/clubs, schedule of games, league-designed home territory, club rivalries, inter-club competitiveness, clubs competing for players, coaches, management, game promotion, schedule convenience, uncertainty of the game’s outcome, and association of the teams to local or regional identifications.

For instance, in their work, Uhrich and Benkenstein (2010) note that team performance along with uncertainty as to the game outcome provides excitement among attendees and results in a positive stadium atmosphere. In the case of social interaction, which was recently highlighted as the predictor of event attendance (Uhrich & Benkenstein, 2010), this primarily regards chanting, booing, whistling, bantering, gesturing and doing choreographic routines. Thus, sports stadiums might well be interpreted as a connecting place that takes on a social facilitation role, which can significantly predict stadium attendance (Won & Kitamura, 2006; Zhang et al. 2004). Such social attributes might potentially increase the attendance rate at live soccer events as well as contributing to a greater team involvement, which primarily concerns the state of motivation and interest in a given team as evoked by situational factors (e.g. social interaction and entertainment experience that take place in a stadium) (Tsotsou, 2012). Hence, we hypothesize that:

H1: Social attributes of the stadium, as reflected through social interaction and entertainment experience, have a positive influence on the individual's motivation to attend a game at a stadium.

H2: Social attributes of the stadium, as reflected through social interaction and entertainment experience, have a positive influence on the individual's team involvement.

Moreover, considering that if an individual possesses a higher level of motivation to attend a game at a particular stadium, especially in the case of first time attendees, there is a greater possibility to develop team involvement, hence:

H3: Motivation to attend a game at a stadium positively influences an individual's team involvement.

Although there is little to no research that investigates stadium loyalty, we approach it in terms of willingness to constantly come back to the stadium to watch soccer game matches instead of watching it at home. According to several researchers like Lee, Kyle and Scott (2012), a particular place attachment is a form of attitudinal commitment that evokes destination loyalty and the motivation to come (back). Authors also emphasize that it is greatly affected by the level of satisfaction an individual experiences in a given place.

Considering the existing low level of stadium attendance in a country that regards soccer as its national sport and also highly invests into soccer stadium construction, we stipulate that such examination is critical. Hence, we hypothesize the following:

H4: Motivation to attend the game at a stadium positively influences stadium loyalty.

H5: Individual team involvement positively influences stadium loyalty.

Research Methodology and Data Analysis

Research Method

To conduct this research, we utilized the survey method as it is best suited to describe and enumerate objects, beliefs, perceptions and establish/prove claims about their characteristics (Diamond, 2000). To be precise, we applied a mixed survey methodology that primarily consisted of directly administered surveys and web-based surveys carried out through Google Forms platform, for in terms of time and cost consideration they are considered to be the most appropriate as well as being able to acquire a higher response rate and higher objectivity of responses (Wilkinson and McNeil, 1996). Prior to the primary survey, all items were reviewed by three academic professors who evaluated the appropriateness of the research constructs and related items. Based on the feedback from academicians, vague and redundant items were either eliminated or modified. Then, the final versions of both survey questionnaires measuring all the 16 items were directly distributed and sent via email by the research assistant to soccer fans and people who attend soccer games at the local stadiums in the cities of Jeddah, Makkah, Dammam, and Riyadh. This allowed us to grasp the bigger picture and a better understanding in terms of stadium and soccer attachments across the population. Questionnaires were distributed within a 3-week period from January 9th to January 28th, 2021, and the response rate was 85% (161) from an overall size of 190 samples. After screening all datasets for any incorrectly filled or incomplete questionnaires, the overall size was reduced to 161 completed questionnaires. Furthermore, the construct of stadium social attributes was modeled as second-order super-ordinate construct (Chin 1998; Edwards 2001).

Each of the constituent dimensions to the second-order construct was measured reflectively and in turn reflected upon. Such modeling decision was due to the fact that all dimensions of the second-order construct are interdependent and unlikely to exist independently of one another. Thus, for instance, when respondents assess the entertainment experience, they will most likely be impacted by their evaluation of social interactions they come across, primarily because such social attributes contribute to the overall intangible feeling of the facility and to a certain degree represent elements of the stadium that are critical to the visitors' game experience. Moreover, the natural sampling method was used due to its lack of influence on the composition of the sample respondents (Hussey and Hussey, 1997). All items used for the construct were adapted from validated instruments modified in order to fit the sport's marketing context. In order to ensure statistical variability, the seven-point Likert scale was used (from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree") to rate each item. The demographic information of the survey respondents is presented below.

Table 1. Demographic Information Sample

Age of the Respondent	
18-29 years old	65 (40.4%)
30-39 years old	59 (36.6%)
40-49 years old	24 (14.9)
50-59 years old	9 (5.6%)
60 years old and above	4 (2.5%)
Games Attendance Frequency at the Stadium	
Light Users (attend 1 game per month)	113 (70%)
Medium Users (attend 2-3 games per month)	37(23%)
Heavy Users (attend 4 or more games per month)	11 (7%)
Monthly Income	
Less than approximately \$ 260	28 (17.4%)
From approximately \$ 261 - \$ 799	18 (11.2 %)
From approximately \$ 800 - \$ 1300	10 (6.2 %)
From approximately \$ 1301 - \$ 2600	44 (27.3 %)
More than approximately \$ 2600	61 (37.9)
Ticket Price	
From approximately \$ 6 - \$ 12	143 (88.8)
From approximately \$ 12 - \$ 14	12 (7.5%)
From approximately \$ 18 - \$ 32	0
From approximately \$ 80 - \$ 130	1 (0.6 %)
From approximately \$ 130 - \$ 180	5 (3.1 %)

Data Analysis

Prior to conducting the data analysis, all datasets were screened to indicate outliers, and to expose and exclude extreme datasets through SPSS in so as to improve performance of the statistical methods (Odom & Henson, 2002). The research model consisted of 1 second order and 3 first order constructs with reflective indicators, and was tested for common method bias by performing Harman’s (1967) one-factor extraction test in SPSS, which showed that no single factor accounted for more than 50 percent of the total variance explained (Schriesheim, 1979). Thus, it confirmed that common method bias is not a threat to this study. Moreover, all reflective indicators showed good internal consistency (Table 2) and good discriminant validity, as the square roots of AVE for each construct are greater than their correlations with other constructs (Table 3). Consequently, our proposed research model was tested in the Smart PLS 2.0 software, which is a form of structural equation modeling (SEM), appropriate for multi-variate models analysis (Chin, 1998). The results of the SEM analysis are discussed in the section below.

Table 2. AVE levels, Composite Reliability and Cronbach’s Alpha

	AVE (>0.50)	Composite Reliability (>0.70)	Cronbach’s Alpha (> 0.70)
Entertainment Experience	0.91	0.95	0.90
Social Interaction	0.85	0.95	0.91
Team Involvement	0.69	0.87	0.77
Motivation to Attend the Games at the Stadium	0.81	0.93	0.88
Stadium Loyalty	0.81	0.94	0.92

Table 3. Discriminant Validity

	Entertainment Experience	Social Interaction	Team Involvement	Motivation to Attend the Games at the Stadium	Stadium Loyalty
Entertainment Experience	0.95				
Social Interaction	0.87	0.92			
Team Involvement	0.66	0.71	0.83		
Motivation to Attend the Games at the Stadium	0.80	0.88	0.81	0.90	
Stadium Loyalty	0.65	0.71	0.70	0.77	0.90

Results

Findings of the Study

The primary results of the structural equation modeling are illustrated in Figure 2 and show values of constructs' R squares and t-statistics, which are determinants of whether hypothesized relations are statistically significant. The critical values for two-tailed tests are in accordance with the work of Hair et al. (2011) where 1.65 indicates significance level of 10%, 1.96 shows significance level of 5%, and 2.58 indicates significance level of 1%. The results of the SEM analysis are as follows.

The social attributes of the stadium attended while soccer games take place ($\beta= 0.88$ $p< 0.001$; $t= 38.4$) have significantly affected motivation to attend soccer games at any given stadium, thus proving H1. In addition, a particular hypothesized relationship had the strongest t statistic value, which indicates how important it is to create a venue (e.g. stadium) where people can enjoy the game and be afforded a great level of social interaction.

Furthermore, the motivation to attend games at a stadium has greatly influenced an individual's team involvement ($\beta= 0.829$ $p< 0.001$; $t= 7.48$), which proves H3 and emphasizes that even if a person who attends a game is no fan of a particular team or sport for that matter, one can become a fan primarily due to facility-related satisfaction. Moreover, both motivation ($\beta= 0.532$ $p< 0.001$; $t= 3.9$) and team involvement ($\beta= 0.304$ $p< 0.011$; $t= 2.1$) have significantly affected the stadium loyalty of the soccer game attendee, which proved both H4 and H5, respectively. Despite the fact that most of the hypothesized relations were proven, H2 continued to be rejected. This can be explained as follows: although the social attributes of stadium remain important, when they have a direct influence on the individual's team involvement, their effects are not enough, primarily because there are more elements for an individual to become a soccer team fan such as the quality of the game itself, or already existing opinions and views that he might have with regard to a particular team. Thus, future research can explore such aspects in order to acquire a broader picture and a better understanding.

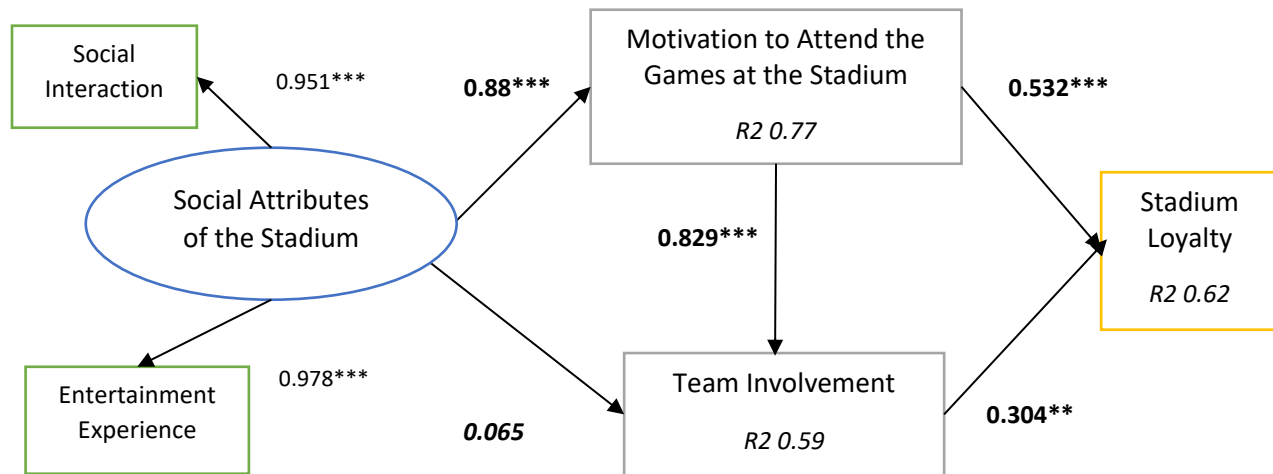


Figure 2. Results of the Proposed Research Model

Implications of the Study

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The primary limitation of our research is the fact that we surveyed respondents from Saudi Arabia, hence the results of this study cannot be generalized to other countries. Nonetheless, the implications of our research can be applied to countries that share a similar cultural background such as the Gulf Countries. In addition, due to certain cultural aspects, demographic information in our sample only concerned male respondents due to the customs of the particular country where the investigation took place. Thus, future research should consider broadening the sample in terms of its demographic. In addition, future research should consider adding more constructs such as game satisfaction and its constituent dimensions in order to explore the bigger picture that includes team involvement and potential team loyalty.

Conclusion

This study examined the influence of social attributes around soccer on motivation to attend the game, team involvement, and stadium loyalty within the Saudi Arabian context. Having investigated this issue, we were able to ascertain the critical elements that contribute not only to attendance at live soccer events, but also create strong loyalty to physical facilities among the general public through the attributes of social interaction and entertainment experience. By utilizing the structural equation modeling technique through Smart PLS, we were able to prove all hypothesized relations and arrive at important implications for both the theoretical and practical sport marketing/management fields.

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