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1

‘As American as Mom, Apple Pie and Dutch Soccer?’: The Team Identification of Foreign Ajax FC Supporters

Anthony K. Kerr, Narelle F. Smith and Alastair Anderson

1. Introduction

Professional team sport, like other forms of popular culture, is attractive and highly marketable. Furthermore, technological advances and globalization have greatly expanded the potential marketplace for professional sport organizations. For instance, Barcelona FC is believed to have 70 million supporters worldwide¹ and English rival, Manchester United, has seen its fan base double in the past five years to 139 million.² Real Madrid could have a potential fan base of nearly half a billion.³ However, foreign interest extends beyond Association football, and the success of home-grown players such as Suzuki, Matsui and Matsuzaka has boosted the popularity in Japan of a number of Major League Baseball (MLB) teams. Similarly, 30 million Chinese regularly watch the National Basketball Association’s (NBA) Houston Rockets to cheer on their countryman, Yao Ming (Larmer, 2005).

Ben-Porat (2000: 344) claimed that a foreign team often becomes “an ‘overseas sweetheart,’ far away but close to the heart”. Kerr (2008, 2009a) describes these individuals as ‘satellite supporters’ and they have become increasingly critical in a global marketplace since they often generate significant revenue. For instance, sport organizations such as the NBA (India), Australian and New Zealand rugby union (Japan), the J-League’s Urawa Reds (Europe) and the Australian Football League’s Hawthorn (New Zealand),⁴ are actively targeting foreign markets (Dolles and Söderman, 2005, 2011). Real Madrid now earns 60 per cent of merchandise revenue from international markets, up from 10 per cent

at the beginning of the decade (Jones, Parkes and Houlihan, 2006). Moreover, in a bid to garner more revenue they have even argued for earlier kick-off times in the Spanish league so that more Chinese fans can watch matches.⁵ Although satellite supporters might prove to be the future lifeblood of a sport franchise, their psychological attachment to a foreign-based team has received relatively little attention.

2. Team identification

Wann et al. (2001: 3) describe team identification as “the extent to which a fan feels psychologically connected” to a particular team or player. Professional sports, given their importance in modern society, often benefit from the identification that develops between the team and its fans. Indeed, team identification is based upon social identification (Fink, Trail and Anderson, 2002; Madrigal, 2004; Wann and Branscombe, 1993). Consequently, fans that identify strongly with their team tend to invest more time and money in support (Milne and McDonald, 1999; Murrell and Dietz, 1992; Sutton et al., 1997; Wann and Branscombe, 1990, 1993, 1995).

Although fandom is intrinsically personal, reasons have been identified which may explain why an individual develops an identification with a team. In addition, for those with high levels of identification, the role of fan is an important component of their identity. According to Wann (2006a), individuals identify with their chosen team due to three important factors: psychological, environmental and team-related.

A key psychological factor is the supporter’s need for belonging and affiliation, and the opportunity to affiliate with others is a common reason given for team identification (Wann, Tucker and Schrader, 1996). Sutton et al. (1997: 19) argued that community affiliation, derived from “common symbols, shared goals, history, and a fan’s need to belong” is the most significant element in the creation of team identification.

Environmental factors, in particular the process of socialization, also contribute to identification with a team (Wann, 2006a). The socialization process, whereby one learns and internalizes “the attitudes, values, knowledge and behaviors that are associated with fans of a team” (Kolbe and James, 2000: 25), is critical to team identification. Common socialization agents include the family (Dimmock and Grove, 2006; Donavan, Janda and Suh, 2006; Funk and James, 2001; Greenwood, Kanters and Casper, 2006; Jacobson, 2003; Jones, 1997; Kolbe and James, 2000; Melnick and Wann, 2004; Wann, Tucker and Schrader, 1996) and friends or peers (Crawford, 2003; Dimmock and Grove, 2006; Donavan, Janda

and Suh, 2006; Jacobson, 2003; Kolbe and James, 2000; Melnick and Wann, 2004; Wann, Tucker and Schrader, 1996). The introduction of satellite television and the Internet has prompted others to suggest the media as a viable agent (Jacobson, 2003; Mahony et al., 2002; Melnick and Wann, 2004; Sutton et al., 1997; Wann, Tucker and Schrader, 1996).

These environmental factors can influence team identification through people and place or via “physical proximity to the entity” (Donavan, Janda and Suh, 2006: 125). Socialization through geographic proximity is such a powerful force because living or growing up close to a team increases opportunities for socialization (Wann, 2006a). Therefore, geographic proximity, or support for a ‘hometown team’, has typically featured as an important determinant in a supporter’s identification with their team (Greenwood, Kanters and Casper, 2006; Kolbe and James, 2000; Wann, Tucker and Schrader, 1996).

The third factor in the development of team identification relates to issues such as team performance, player attributes and organizational characteristics (Wann, 2006a). Fink, Trail and Anderson (2002) found vicarious achievement to be the primary driver of team identification, while it has also been shown that the degree of identification accounts for the ‘die-hard’ and ‘fair-weather’ fan. Die-hard fans remain loyal irrespective of on-field performance, while the latter associate with a team only when it performs well (Wann and Branscombe, 1990). Organizational characteristics encompass the ‘off-field’ image of the organization, including managerial decisions, reputation and tradition, and the quality of their conference or league (Sutton et al., 1997).

Team identification has a positive impact upon psychological health because it can facilitate social connections with others (Melnick, 1993; Wann et al., 2001). However, some argue that fans who identify with geographically distant teams (or, for our purpose, satellite supporters), do not usually receive the same psychological benefits (Wann, 2006a, 2006b; Wann and Pierce, 2005; Wann et al., 1999, 2004). Identification with distant teams is unlikely to provide significant psychological benefit because supporters are usually isolated from, and find it difficult to interact with, likeminded fans (Wann, 2006b, 2006c). However, should satellite supporters be able to enjoy the company of fellow fans, their shared identification with the team might enhance their psychological well-being (Wann, 2006c; Wann et al., 1999, 2004).

The global popularity of certain teams has seen the rise of fan communities. For instance, the English Premier League’s (EPL) Liverpool FC has more than 150 international supporter branches and the National Football League’s (NFL) Cleveland Browns has a worldwide network

of 'Browns Backers'. Kolbe and James (2000) found that Browns' fans felt a 'connective bond' with a community of likeminded supporters. Although research suggests that fans of geographically distant teams are unlikely to accrue the same psychological benefits as local fans, it is apparent that under certain circumstances they might accrue psychological benefits from their fandom. This might explain the existence, and growth, of online (and physical) foreign fan communities.

Wann, Tucker and Schrader's (1996) landmark study on the origins of team identification suggested their effort should be considered "the first step in understanding the factors involved in identification with sport teams" (ibid.: 1001). In recent years there has been increased attention paid to team identification (see, for example, Greenwood, Kanters and Casper, 2006; Gwinner and Swanson, 2003; Jacobson, 2003; Jones, 1998; Kerr, 2009a, 2009b; Kolbe and James, 2000; Sutton et al., 1997). Furthermore, Richardson and O'Dwyer (2003) welcomed research as to why fans adopted their favourite team.

Sport marketers need to understand the satellite supporter as a valuable consumer and adopt a different strategy to reach these 'international fans' and to enhance their team's global brand profile (Dolles and Söderman, 2008). However, research has been largely confined to domestic or local fans. This chapter reports the results of preliminary research on the team identification of satellite supporters and is the second in a series designed to foster a better understanding of these consumers. An earlier study (Kerr, forthcoming) was an exploratory examination of the team identification of Australian Football League (AFL) American supporters. This chapter examines satellite supporters and their identification with the Dutch football giant, AFC Ajax of Amsterdam (Ajax FC).

Founded at the turn of the twentieth century, Ajax FC has been crowned European champion four times and has dominated the Dutch football league, the Eredivisie. Since their first national championship in 1918, the red and whites have won an additional 28 league titles.⁶ Ajax FC is famous for their youth academy which has produced superstars such as Johan Crujff, Frank Rijkaard, Marco van Basten, Patrick Kluivert and Dennis Bergkamp.⁷ It was under the leadership of Crujff in 1972 that the club had one of the best seasons ever by a professional football team as Ajax FC dominated the Dutch and European competitions. In an effort to exploit international opportunities and expand its brand, it has also established a South African franchise, Ajax Cape Town (Browne, 1999).

3. Method

The Internet has been successfully used to engage with distant sport fans: online surveys (Kerr, 2009a, 2009b; Nash, 2000), online message boards (End, 2001; Lewis, 2001; Mitrano, 1999) and online ‘interviews’ (Heinonen, 2002; Kerr, 2009a, 2009b; Mitrano, 1999). The existence of online communities also makes it possible to target specific and difficult to reach populations (Hoyle, Harris and Judd, 2002). The popularity of the Internet for fan research reflects the increased access to, and acceptance of, electronic media as a means of communication and the increased availability of broadband connections (Alreck and Settle, 2004). According to Bailey (1994: 205), the online survey might prove “the ideal method for studying respondents in remote locations all over the world”.

Since our interest was in satellite supporters of Ajax FC and given the advantages of administration over the Internet we chose to develop an online questionnaire. Officially launched in January 1996, www.ajaxusa.com, an online forum for supporters of Ajax FC, pre-dates the club’s official website, www.ajax.nl. As founder, Jim McGough explained, “In those days we provided a service that was badly needed. At our height, we could occasionally have more than ten thousand unique site visitors in a single day.”⁸ With more than a 1000 registered members, Ajax USA agreed to act as the vehicle for the administration of the survey.

3.1. Respondents

One hundred and eighty seven visitors to www.ajaxusa.com voluntarily filled in the questionnaire. However, 59 cases were removed from the sample: 34 individuals completed only the demographic questions and 25 others were Dutch or had an immediate family member from the Netherlands. The primary purpose of this study was to research satellite supporters and so these latter individuals, perhaps better categorized as ‘expatriate fans’, were outside its scope. Therefore, the final sample comprised 128 satellite supporters of Ajax FC. All of the respondents in the sample were male and nearly three-quarters were aged between 18 and 35 years. Furthermore, although most of the respondents (36.7%) were American, which was consistent with a US supporter organization, the sample represented 44 countries. However, only five other countries (UK, England, India, Slovenia, Canada and Denmark) had more than three representatives.

3.2. Materials and procedure

Respondents followed a link on the Ajax USA website that led them to the survey hosted by www.surveymonkey.com, an independent third party which specializes in the creation and management of online surveys. The questionnaire was available for two weeks and contained five sections. The first section described the purpose of the study while the second asked supporters to complete demographic details such as age, gender, country of residence and nationality. Respondents were asked whether they had a personal connection to the Netherlands, the home of Ajax FC (as described earlier, these individuals were excluded from the study).

The third section asked respondents to rate the importance of the 14 items related to their original decision to support Ajax FC. The study's purpose was to explore supporter identification with a specific sport team; however, the term 'team identification' is a psychological definition most likely unknown to many potential participants. They were instead asked about their 'support' for the team. The items were derived from an exploratory examination of satellite supporter team identification (Kerr, forthcoming) and Kerr and Gladden's (2008) brand equity model in a global sport marketplace. The brand equity items were included due to the assertion that brand equity and team identification are likely to share common antecedents (Kerr, 2008, 2009b). An additional item probed team loyalty. The items were scored on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1, not important, to 5, extremely important.

The team-specific questionnaire was based on an earlier pilot study (Kerr, forthcoming). The questionnaire allowed participants to explain in their own words why they supported their favourite sport team. The use of open-ended questions was advantageous since it was an exploratory examination of their team support and many of the responses mirrored antecedents of team identification found in the fan literature. The survey instrument measured what it was designed to measure, notably those items responsible for their identification with the team. The potential drivers of team identification unearthed from this study were able to be easily modified to explore the satellite supporter's identification with any specific team. The online questionnaire was therefore a valid and reliable research instrument to examine a satellite supporter's identification with a foreign-based team and was consequently used as the basis for this Ajax FC study.

As discussed earlier, team identification is based upon social identification. Tajfel and Turner (1979, 1986) developed social identity

theory to understand the behaviour of individuals in group situations. They concluded that individuals identify with groups they perceive they belong to, and then compare these groups with others to reflect positively upon themselves. In the context of this chapter, satellite supporters chose to categorize themselves as fans of Ajax FC, identified with the club and fellow fans, and compared themselves to rival team fans.

Social identity theory has often been used to examine team identification (Dimmock, Grove and Eklund, 2005; Dimmock and Gucciardi, 2007; Donovan, Janda and Suh, 2006; Gwinner and Swanson, 2003; Jacobson, 2003; Jones, 1998; Wann, 2006a). Donovan, Carlson and Zimmerman (2005: 33) argued that social identity theory is an appropriate perspective to understand fan behaviour since this behaviour “involves interpersonal and group relationships, it is socially observable, it often revolves around the distinctions that exist between opposing groups, and it is heavily affected by the level of identification with a team”. Social identity theory is a proven and popular framework to explore issues regarding the sport fan.

The fourth section was structured to collect data about consumption behaviour. Section five thanked respondents for their time and invited them to participate in further discussions regarding their support of a foreign team.

The data were coded and entered into SPSS 15. Frequency tables and descriptive statistics were produced for all variables. Differences between means on quantitative variables according to age categories were tested. Chi-square tests were used to test for significant relationships between categorical variables.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Identification with Ajax FC

The responses in relation to the 14 items pertaining to the decision to support a club were ranked from the highest to the lowest based on the percentage of respondents who indicated that the item was at least ‘moderately important’ in their initial decision to support Ajax FC. The ranking revealed the importance of four reasons: reputation and/or tradition; the presence of a particular player(s); team success; and the ability to watch Ajax FC play due to media coverage. The salience of these reasons is shown in Table 1.1.

By far the most important reason in their original decision to support Ajax FC was its reputation and tradition: more than 60 per cent

Table 1.1 Importance of reasons in original Ajax FC support ($N = 128$)

Reasons for support	% Important	% Not important	Mean ^{a,b}	SD
Team reputation and/or tradition	96.2	3.1	4.40	0.93
They had a particular player(s) I liked	79.0	9.4	3.65	1.31
They were (and possibly still are) a successful team	77.3	8.6	3.33	1.19
Ability to watch them play due to media coverage	60.1	24.2	3.00	1.51
They belonged to the highest division, the Eredivisie	53.8	33.6	2.57	1.37
A personal/emotional 'connection' to the Netherlands	49.2	40.6	2.60	1.55
Liked their logo design and/or name	37.5	39.8	2.26	1.31
They had a particular manager I liked	37.5	49.2	2.12	1.30
Liked the stadium they called 'home'	34.4	46.9	2.15	1.33
The broadcast quality of their games	31.3	57.0	1.95	1.27
A fellow countryman played for them	20.3	71.9	1.63	1.16
My family or friends supported them	13.3	76.6	1.48	1.01
They had high-profile and/or quality sponsors	12.5	75.8	1.43	0.88
They had famous or celebrity fans	11.0	78.9	1.38	0.86

^a Lower scores indicate lower salience for each variable.

^b Scale range 1–5 for each variable.

rated the item as extremely important. Respondents were informed that this item could include the team's history of success, its style of play and ethical behaviour as these are features often found in discussions of team reputation and tradition in the fan literature (Gladden, Milne and Sutton, 1998; Kolbe and James, 2000; Sutton et al., 1997; Underwood, Bond and Baer, 2001). For instance, an American fan said, "at the time they were the top team in the world and I wanted to cheer against them since they were often the favorite to win. However, their fluid, attacking style of play won me over not only to the team, but also the sport of football." Other supporters agreed, claiming that "Ajax are innovators of the modern game" (Evan, USA) and that their "style of play was highly attractive when I first began watching them (1993–94), and they were entering their most successful period in the modern era" (Jim, USA).

The second most important reason was the presence of particular player(s) and that Ajax FC was successful. A third of respondents said that having a particular player they liked at the club was extremely important. Indeed, for some, the fact that Ajax FC boasted a number

of Dutch superstars from the famous 1974 World Cup side fuelled their support. One Finnish fan said, “I actually got ‘the Ajax fever’ from Oranje 74 [the 1974 Dutch World Cup team]” while Ben, an American, explained that the “backbone of the Clockwork Orange Dutch World Cup side were the Ajax players, i.e. Crujff, Neeskens, Suurbier, Hulshof, Rep, Keizer, Krol, etc. I so enjoyed watching them play in the national side that I decided to learn about the club side they played for.” A fifth of respondents said that the club’s success at the time they became a supporter was extremely important. For instance, “the year I started watching football was in 1995, in wich [sic] Ajax won the champions league. Most probably because they won the cup...” (Edward, Lebanon).

As can be seen in Table 1.1, these three reasons were almost universally regarded as important in the original decision to support Ajax FC. Cialdini et al. (1976) claimed that fans would publicly announce their association with successful teams, or tend to ‘bask in reflected glory’ (BIRG). As a result, spectators often choose to follow successful teams rather than those which perennially struggle (Branscombe and Wann, 1991; End et al., 2002; Mahony, Howard and Madrigal, 2000; Wann, Tucker and Schrader, 1996). It was little surprise, therefore, that the club’s success featured prominently.

The next most important influence regarded media coverage. A quarter of respondents said the ability to watch Ajax FC play due to media coverage was extremely important. The fan literature consistently claims that socialisation agents are instrumental in the development of team identification, however, satellite supporters cannot benefit from geographic proximity, a key socialization agent. Instead, their attendance is largely virtual via the radio, television or Internet (Söderman, Dolles and Dum, 2010). Moreover, in the absence of international media exposure, teams are unlikely to develop significant brand awareness outside their domestic markets.

The majority of Ajax USA’s members live thousands of kilometres from the Netherlands and so international media arrangements ensure that Ajax FC games are available to supporters who are abroad. For instance, one Finnish fan explained that he became “an Ajax fan in the 80’s when I started to see Ajax’s games via Sky Channel”. Indeed, the increased accessibility to Ajax football has led to the ultimate demise of www.ajaxusa.com. As its founder explains: “Ajax USA has been there, in one form or another, since 1995. Thousands of ‘Ajax starved’ supporters from across the globe relied on us: they couldn’t watch Ajax games. But times have changed. Almost every Ajax match is available online

these days.”⁹ However, the importance of media coverage is not as compelling as it might seem since one-quarter of the respondents rated it as ‘not important’. There were no significant differences between age groups in relation to the salience of media coverage in their decision to support Ajax FC.

Expatriate fans were excluded from the sample since the aim of this research was to understand satellite supporters and their identification with a foreign-based sport team. However, their involvement provided an opportunity to compare their responses to their foreign counterparts. A number of reasons were clearly important to the expatriate Ajax fan, that is, they were at least ‘moderately important’ in their original identification. A comparison of these supporters can be seen in Table 1.2.

Both groups were similar in terms of the relative importance of the items proposed as motivators of team support. However, two key differences emerged. For expatriate fans, a personal or emotional ‘connection’ to the Netherlands was the second most important item: 92 per cent of them considered this ‘connection’ at least moderately important in their decision to adopt Ajax FC (compared to less than half of satellite supporters). For instance, “I love Holland and that love tides over to Ajax ... They are kind of a simble [*sic*] of my love for the Netherlands, and give me an outlet to express that love” (Matthew, Australia). Indeed, a third of expatriate fans said their connection to the Netherlands was extremely important in their choice. Furthermore, 40 per cent of

Table 1.2 Mean scores of the important reasons in original Ajax FC support (satellite supporters versus expatriate fans)

Reasons for support	Mean ^{a,b}	SD
Satellite supporters (<i>N</i> = 128)		
Team reputation and/or tradition	4.40	0.93
They had a particular player(s) I liked	3.65	1.31
They were (and possibly still are) a successful team	3.33	1.19
Ability to watch them play due to media coverage	3.00	1.51
Expatriate fans (<i>N</i> = 25)		
Team reputation and/or tradition	4.12	1.05
I had a personal/emotional ‘connection’ to the Netherlands	3.88	1.09
They had a particular player(s) I liked	3.28	1.10
They were (and possibly still are) a successful team	3.08	1.22

^a Lower scores indicate lower salience for each variable.

^b Scale range 1–5 for each variable.

expatriate fans said that because their family or friends supported Ajax FC was at least moderately important in their team choice. As such, family or friends (although a distant seventh with a mean of 2.32) were more influential upon their choice of team than for satellite supporters. These results are consistent with the expatriate fan being Dutch or having an immediate family member from the Netherlands.

Wann (2006a) claimed that individuals would identify with their team due to psychological, environmental and team-related factors. However, as discussed later, opportunities for satellite supporters to share the company of fellow Ajax fans was somewhat limited. On the other hand, the importance of environmental factors, especially the media, was evident for satellite supporters (in contrast to the importance of another socialization agent, family or friends, for the expatriate fan). In addition, team-related factors (such as reputation, tradition, success or a notable player) were instrumental in making the Ajax FC an attractive product for foreign-based fans.

4.2. The loyalty of Ajax FC satellite supporters

Support for a 'hometown team' consistently features in the team identification literature yet, in the absence of geographic ties, one might expect foreign consumers to be more fickle and their support for overseas teams less stable. This was, however, not the case and some supporters were quite adamant about their devotion. A Finnish fan explained that "once you got the 'Ajax fever', you will never 'recover' so I still follow Ajax and Oranje".

When asked, 'Is it possible you would ever stop supporting Ajax FC?', only 17 of the 128 respondents (13.3%) said 'yes'. Although one might expect satellite supporters to resemble 'fair-weather' rather than 'die-hard' fans, this was not reflected in the study. Three of the 17 were aged over 55, representing 60 per cent of the five respondents aged over 55. Thus, older respondents were more likely to consider switching teams, however, the small numbers represented from this age group make it unwise to generalize.

4.3. Consumption behaviour of Ajax FC satellite supporters

Respondents were asked how often they participated in a number of consumption activities related to their support of Ajax FC (during, or out of, season) For instance, they could purchase licensed merchandise, watch games on television, visit official websites or purchase a sponsor's product.

Table 1.3 Behaviour to support Ajax FC (during season) ($N = 126$)

Supporter behaviour	%	%	%	%
	Weekly	Monthly	Seasonally	Never
Visit unofficial club supporter websites	91.3	4.8	1.6	2.4
Visit the official club website	67.5	19.8	7.1	5.6
Watch online video highlights	57.9	26.2	6.3	9.5
Watch club games on television	17.5	38.1	27.8	16.7
Get together with other club fans	7.1	4.8	21.4	66.7
Purchase team-related merchandise	4.0	5.6	69.0	21.4
Purchase products from companies that support the club	1.6	6.3	30.2	61.9
Purchase tickets to the club's Eredivisie games	1.6	2.4	22.2	73.8
Purchase additional club items	1.6	0.8	4.8	92.9
Purchase shares in the club	1.6	0.0	1.6	96.8
Purchase tickets to the club's overseas games	0.0	1.6	15.1	83.3

As shown in Table 1.3, three activities were the most popular. More than 90 per cent of respondents visit unofficial Ajax FC supporter websites, the official club website (www.ajax.nl), and watch online video highlights at least once per season. More than 90 per cent of respondents visit unofficial supporter websites (such as www.ajaxusa.com) weekly. As noted earlier, it has been argued that fans who identify with geographically distant teams might not receive the same psychological benefit as traditional fans (Wann, 2006a, 2006b; Wann and Pierce, 2005; Wann et al., 1999, 2004), since they find themselves isolated from fellow fans. However, should they be able to interact with such fans they might receive psychological benefits (Wann, 2006c). This might explain the propensity of respondents to visit unofficial supporter sites in a bid to interact with this community. However, it does not explain why respondents rarely 'got together' with fellow fans, although opportunities for face-to-face interaction might be limited.

Although the Dutch league, the Eredivisie, is not as popular (or accessible) as the major European leagues, 83 per cent of respondents watched televised club games at least once per season, while more than half did so at least once per month. The absence of geographic proximity may have reinforced the importance of the media to these consumers and influenced their behaviour. In addition, nearly 80 per cent of respondents

said they purchase licensed merchandise at least once per season. This appeared logical since clubs regularly re-design their jerseys to maximize revenue.

Several activities were particularly unpopular. For instance, nearly two-thirds of respondents said that they never purchased products from club sponsors. This would be a worrying sign for those companies that financially support the Ajax FC as a means to drive sales. Current sponsors include financial services and insurance provider, Aegon, ABN-AMRO, Adidas and brewery, Amstel. This may be because not all of these products are readily available in the satellite supporter's home market. In addition, nearly three-quarters of respondents said that they never purchased tickets to Ajax FC Eredivisie games. This most likely reflected their willingness to purchase tickets to an overseas sport contest, hence the significance of the media.

The final question asked whether respondents pursued any of these activities outside of the football season. The 11 earlier proposed activities were reduced to 9 for their out-of-season consumption because, although it was no longer possible to watch live televised club games, supporters could still watch video highlights of previously completed matches. Furthermore, the question regarding the purchase of tickets no longer differentiated between Eredivisie and foreign exhibition fixtures. Responses were rated dichotomously as a yes/no question and the results can be seen in Table 1.4.

Those activities most popular outside of football season mirrored those pursued during the season. Visiting unofficial Ajax FC supporter websites was the most common activity followed by visiting the club's official website. Supporters in the youngest age group (18–25) were less likely than others to visit the official website although this was still a

Table 1.4 Behaviour to support Ajax FC (out of season) ($N = 126$)

Popularity of behaviour highest- to lowest-grouped	%
Visit unofficial club supporter websites	94.4
Visit the official club website	87.3
Watch video highlights on the Internet or television	73.0
Purchase team-related merchandise	49.2
Purchase products from companies that support the club	23.0
Get together with other club fans	19.8
Purchase tickets to club games for the upcoming season	12.7
Purchase additional club items	4.0
Purchase shares in the club	3.2

very popular activity with 77.6 per cent of these individuals participating in this activity compared with 95.6 per cent of those aged older than 25 ($p = 0.002$). Furthermore, nearly three-quarters of respondents watched video highlights online or on television.

5. Limitations and future directions

This preliminary study is the second in a series designed to research the reasons why satellite supporters choose to support a foreign-based sport team. While an earlier exploratory study examined satellite supporters and their support for AFL teams, the study reported here extends the research to satellite supporters of a specific team, AFC Ajax of Amsterdam. Although it has pointed to significant evidence as to why, and how, these consumers support the club, there are opportunities to strengthen an understanding of the satellite supporter and their identification with a chosen team.

The worldwide popularity of football has seen a number of its team brands become internationally recognized. Although the objective of this study was not to make broad generalizations of other teams, it would be useful to compare the results to other football teams. The Ajax FC has a proud and distinguished history, has dominated its domestic league and has nurtured potential superstars for the famous Oranje. As a result, perhaps the factors that lead satellite supporters to identify with a less distinguished, or popular, football team might be different. Furthermore, due to its universal appeal, football was chosen for this study, yet the identification of supporters from other sports might differ significantly from the football fan.

The respondents in this study exhibited high levels of loyalty and could be said to have a high degree of identification with Ajax FC. As earlier explained, highly identified fans are more inclined to support their team and being a fan is an important component of their identity. An analysis of satellite supporters with lower levels of identification would prove an interesting comparison; however, they are less likely to join an organized supporter group and so locating a large number of these individuals is a challenge.

6. Conclusion

The media's reach and influence has allowed fans to have unprecedented access to their favourite teams and players regardless of geographic location. Although advances in communications technology

and globalization have greatly enhanced the popularity of many professional sport teams, there has been very little research undertaken on the satellite supporter. In a competitive global sport marketplace, there is a need to understand who these consumers are and why they identify with a foreign-based team.

This study sought to understand the origins of team identification for the satellite supporter and explored their identification with the Dutch dynamo, Ajax FC. It generated valuable insights into the psychology of these supporters and their consumption behaviour. Three items were almost universally accepted as important in their original decision to support Ajax FC: team reputation and/or tradition; the presence of particular player(s); and team success. Their ability to watch the team play was also salient and highlighted the importance of international media arrangements as team brands seek to exploit foreign opportunities.

The emergence of these primary antecedents has important implications for sport marketers whose teams battle for market share in a competitive global environment. Although the Ajax FC satellite supporters highlighted the importance of team success, both in a particular season and over time, marketers of professional sport teams are largely unable to control their core product, that is, on-field competition. As a result, sport marketers cannot guarantee team success and are cautioned against focusing on winning in their marketing campaigns. There were, however, a number of other antecedents which marketers can manipulate in order to attract a larger international fan base, notably the team's international exposure, its style of play or player personnel. For instance, although its importance was minimal in this particular case, teams have aggressively signed key foreign players in order to appeal to certain geographic markets.

Although international media arrangements are usually negotiated at the league level, marketers should embrace every opportunity to create broader awareness for their brand in global markets. In addition, improved accessibility to broadband and mobile Internet services provides a golden opportunity for team marketers to cultivate satellite supporters. While www.ajax.nl, the club's official website, proved popular with supporters, unofficial supporter websites were a more attractive destination, especially for the youngest fans in this study. It is conceivable that fans welcomed the opportunity to interact with each other in a user-mediated environment rather than one controlled by the organization, and so an opportunity exists to target a new generation of fans through these and other unofficial media channels such as www.facebook.com, www.myspace.com or www.twitter.com.

Sport organizations could even encourage the development of these channels – for instance, the Liverpool FC enjoys a ‘close working relationship’ with more than 200 official supporter branches – through exclusive content or offers for members. As such, the opportunity exists for sport teams to develop a worldwide brand community or a “specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand” (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001: 412). Once engaged through this medium, the opportunities to strengthen an individual’s connection, or identification with the team, is enhanced and thus offers a potentially lucrative revenue stream.

In conclusion, the satellite supporters in this study expressed intense team loyalty and relied heavily on the media, especially the Internet, to express their support. However, given that they live outside the Netherlands, and that they belong to an online fan organization, it was logical that the media might prove a critical conduit for their fandom. They actively seek opportunities to support Ajax FC (and engage with the club and fellow fans) throughout the year, not solely during football season. Satellite supporters most likely receive psychological benefit from their support of an ‘overseas sweetheart’. As such, these consumers present an opportunity for sport marketers to tap into a potentially lucrative fan base and enhance their own team brands.

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