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Team identification and soccer involvement as determinants of African Generation Y students' Premier Soccer League team psychological commitment

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the influence of soccer involvement and team identification on African Generation Y students' Premier Soccer League (PSL) team psychological commitment in the South African context. In the South African market, the African Generation Y cohort (individuals born between 1986 and 2005) represents a large yet under-researched segment that in 2013 made up 32 percent of the country's population. Understanding the influence of soccer involvement and PSL team identification on PSL team psychological commitment amongst African Generation Y members will help inform PSL team marketing efforts targeted at this significantly sized segment. Those pursuing tertiary qualifications are likely to be of particular interest to marketers, including sport marketers in that a tertiary qualification is generally associated with a higher future earning potential as well as a higher social standing in a community, making graduates likely current and future role models. A descriptive research design was followed whereby data was collected using a self-administered questionnaire from single cross-sectional convenience sample of students across three South African public higher education institutions' campuses situated in the Gauteng province. The data set was analysed using exploratory principle component analysis and structural equation modelling. The findings suggest that soccer involvement and PSL team identification have a direct significant positive effect on African Generation Y students' PSL team psychological commitment.

Keywords: Premier Soccer League (PSL), sport domain involvement, team identification, psychological commitment, African Generation Y students.

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Introduction

Sport spectatorship is a national passion (Alegi, 2004) amongst South Africans as a whole, with local soccer spectatorship being predominant amongst black Africans. One of the country's proudest sporting moments was when they won the African Nations Cup on home ground in 1996. Local soccer teams, organised into a national league plus several knockout cups, are followed with passion by enthusiastic fans. There are 16 teams or clubs in South Africa's Premier Soccer

League (PSL). In a given season, each PSL team plays each of the other teams twice and is awarded points; for example, three for a win and one for a draw (PSL Betting, 2011).

The on-going spectator support of these PSL teams is dependent on their ability to attract and retain the support of the youth, labelled Generation Y, particularly African Generation Y members (hereafter referred to as African Generation Y). Generation Y encompasses individuals born between 1986 and 2005 (Markert, 2004). In 2013, members of the Generation Y cohort made up an estimated 38 percent of South Africa's population, with African Generation Y accounting for 83 percent of the country's total Generation Y cohort (Statistics South Africa, 2013). Marketers, including PSL team marketers, are likely to be especially interested in the student members of this race and age cohort because a tertiary education is often predictive of a higher future earning potential and stronger opinion leadership status (Bevan-Dye *et al.*, 2009; Hallett & Ashley, 2008; Nimon, 2007).

Brand loyalty is a salient concept in the practice of marketing. Brand loyalty is defined as a "distinguishing name and/or symbol intended to identify goods or services of either one seller or a group of sellers and to differentiate those goods and services from those of competitors" (Aaker, 1991). As is the case in other industry sectors, published research (Javani *et al.*, 2012; Alexandris *et al.*, 2008; Kaynak *et al.*, 2008; Bauer *et al.*, 2008; Ross *et al.*, 2007; Ross, 2007; Ross *et al.*, 2006; Bauer *et al.*, 2005a; Bauer *et al.*, 2005b; Gladden & Funk, 2002; Bristow & Sebastian, 2001) indicates that brand loyalty is an important concept in the field of professional sport team marketing.

In relation to professional sport teams, brand loyalty is typically portrayed as being a two dimensional concept, comprising attitudinal or team psychological commitment and team behavioural loyalty (Bodet & Bernache-Assollant, 2011; Bauer *et al.*, 2008; Bauer *et al.*, 2005a; Kwon & Trail, 2003; Mahony *et al.*, 2000). In this study, the focus was on team psychological commitment. Team psychological commitment refers to fans who demonstrate strong psychological attachment (that is, high attitudinal loyalty) as well as active participation (that is, a high behavioural loyalty) towards a sport team (Mahony *et al.*, 2000). Funk and James (2001) refer to attachment as a psychological connection that creates various degrees of association between the individual and sport object (for example, a favourite team). This commitment tends to be persistent overtime and resistant of criticisms (Bauer *et al.*, 2008). According to Mahony *et al.* (2000), those individuals who score high on personal commitment scale will accurately represent those fans who are truly devoted to a particular team.

Several studies have focused on identifying the antecedents of professional sport-team brand loyalty. These studies addressed the importance of viewing

sport teams as a brand in the professional sport setting (Alexandris *et al.*, 2008; Kaynak *et al.*, 2008; Ross *et al.*, 2007; Ross *et al.*, 2006; Bauer *et al.*, 2005b; Gladden & Funk, 2002).

Sport domain involvement is an important determinant of sport team identification, which, in turn, is a significant predictor of sport-team psychological commitment (Stevens & Rosenberger, 2012; Fisher & Wakefield, 1998). Sport domain involvement refers to an individual's interest in a specific genre of sport (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003). According to Fisher and Wakefield (1998), sport domain involvement is an important predictor of sport-team psychological commitment in that it explains why individuals remain fans of unsuccessful teams.

Team identification is recognised as a key antecedent of fan loyalty (Wann & Branscombe, 1993; Sloan, 1989), and an important driving force for fans to attend sport events (Bodet & Bernache-Assollant, 2011; Ko *et al.*, 2010; Theodorakis *et al.*, 2009) or purchase team-related products (Tsiotsou & Alexandris, 2009; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003). Identification refers to "an orientation of the self in regard to other objects including a person or group that result in feelings or sentiments of close attachment" (Trail *et al.*, 2000). Bodet and Bernache-Assollant (2011) suggest that in regard to the dual conceptualisation of consumer loyalty, the concept of team identification is a good predictor of attitudinal loyalty and behavioural loyalty.

Sport involvement

The concept of involvement, which evolved in the 1960s, is derived from the social judgment theory (Dywer, 2011a; Dywer, 2011b). Sport involvement is a useful concept for understanding sports fans attitudes and behaviours (Stevens & Rosenberger III, 2012; Ko, Kim, Kim, & Lee, 2010; Bennett, Ferreira, Lee & Polite, 2009; Funk, Ridinger & Moorman, 2004). The sport spectator involvement consists of both affective involvement and behavioural consumption, which suggests that sport involvement is an important determinant of team psychological commitment (Choi, Martin, Park & Yoh, 2009).

Enduring involvement, also termed ego and leisure involvement, has most often been defined as an 'unobservable state of motivation, arousal or interest toward a recreational activity or associated product, evoked by particular stimulus, motive or situation, and driven properties (Bee & Havitz, 2010; Ko *et al.*, 2010; Bennett *et al.*, 2009; Tsiotsou & Alexandris, 2009; Choi *et al.*, 2009; Alexandris, Douka, Bakaloumi & Tsasousi, 2008a; Alexandris, Douka, Papadoupoulos & Kaltsatou, 2008b; Funk *et al.*, 2004; Funk & James, 2001). The central aspect of involvement is the perceived personal relevance of the object based on this individual's needs, values, and interests (Zaichkowsky, 1985). For instance, used

primarily to understand consumer's behaviour relating to objects, Dywer (2011a) defines involvement as "a motivational attribute reflecting the extent of personal relevance of a product based on the inherent needs and interests of the individual consumer".

Recognising that sport fans differ in their level of involvement serves as a starting point for market segmentation studies (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Hunt, Bristol & Bashaw, 1999) as it becomes possible to identify the variety of consumer sub-groups based on their degree of interest in a particular sport (Desbordes, 2007). Several past studies (Dywer, 2011a; Funk *et al.*, 2004; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Fisher & Wakefield, 1998) emphasise the value of the involvement construct in better understanding consumer motives in the diverse and competitive sport industry. Involvement is measured with the three dimensions of pleasure, sign and centrality (Funk, Filo, Beaton & Pritchard, 2009), and centrality refers to a position the activity holds for an individual's lifestyle (Tsiotsou & Alexandris, 2009; Alexandris *et al.*, 2008a). Individuals scoring high on the attraction and centrality facets would be at the level of attachment (Funk & James, 2001). Attachment is also used by Funk and James (2001) to refer to identification with a team.

Involvement has been found to be positively associated with fan identification (Tsiotsou & Alexandris, 2009; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Fisher & Wakefield, 1998). Laverie and Annette (2000) examined involvement in the context of social identity, where involvement with a team was found to lead to identity related to a team. Kim and Kim (2009) suggest that regardless of the factors that affect it, team identification is recognised as a form of sport event involvement. As such, sport domain involvement as an important determinant of sport team identification, which, in turn, is a significant predictor of sport-team psychological commitment (Stevens & Rosenberger, 2012; Fisher & Wakefield, 1998).

Team identification

The social identity theory has been adapted to various research fields, including social psychology, human resource management, psychology, marketing and consumer behaviour (Lin & Lin, 2008). Within the context of sport consumer behaviour, fan identification is a manifestation of social identity theory. As extension of the Psychological Continuum Model developed by Funk and James (2001), a recent work by Lock, Taylor, Funk and Darcy (2012) integrated the social identity theory to explore how team identification develops in relation to a new sport team, suggesting that a 'new team' context or the early stages of team development provides a compelling opportunity to explore how the development of identification occurs. According to these authors, the social identity theory has been extensively applied to sport consumers as a framework that contributes to

the understanding of identity formation (James, 2001; Fisher & Wakefield, 1998), strength (Wann & Branscombe, 1995, 1993), structure (Heere & James, 2007a; Heere & James, 2007b) and management for sport fans (Cialdini, Borden, Thorne, Walker, Freeman & Sloan, 1976).

However, it seems unlikely in practice that a person suddenly becomes a loyal fan of a sport team (buying season tickets, wearing related apparel, engaging in conversation about the team, or sharing in team success and losses) (Funk & James, 2001). Individuals show interest in a particular sport activity (sport genre) in addition to their interest in a specific team (team identification) (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003), which means that many teams are chosen based on the consumer's psychological connection known as identification (Theodorakis, Wann, Carvalho & Sarmento, 2010; Carlson, Donovan & Cumiskey, 2009). Team identification continues to be a significant area of research interest (Zetou, Kouli, Psarras, Tzetzis & Michalopoulou, 2013; Stevens & Rosenberger III, 2012; Lock *et al.*, 2012; Theodorakis & Wann, 2010; Ko *et al.*, 2010), in that this psychological connection induces positive moods that, in turn, produce feelings, thoughts and preferences (Funk & James, 2004), which are governed by the complexity and strength of sport-related mental associations (Funk & James, 2001) and play a key role in fans' behaviour (Theodorakis *et al.*, 2010). Having a basis for identification offers fans certain benefits, such as following a team may help fans escape their daily stresses, which, in turn, aids in developing stronger associations with that team. Fan identification with a particular team is a symbolic benefit, and positive associations with a team develop based on consumer's eagerness to belong to a group (Kaynak *et al.*, 2008).

In sport context, soccer fans belong to different social groups leading to identification with a team which impact on fan satisfaction (Beccarrini & Ferrand, 2006), hence, individual's level of team identification may reflect underlying needs for social approval, belongingness, or personal expression that helps to explain some aspects of initial attitude development toward a team (for example, team attraction) (Funk & James, 2001). When individual develops a deep psychological attachment that goes beyond a mere loyalty to the team, the identification has occurred (Wakefield, 2007). Among those individuals who have a favourite sport or team, others will continue to progress up the psychological continuum by developing strong attitudes towards a sport and/or a team, until that sport and/or team becomes psychologically important to them (Funk & James, 2001).

Psychological commitment

In brand marketing literature, commitment is defined as the emotional or psychological attachment to a brand (Beatty & Kahle, 1988), whereby "individuals go through sequential psychological processes to become loyal

participants and develop psychological commitment towards the brand” (Bauer, Stockburger-Sauer & Exler, 2008; Bauer, Sauer & Schmitt, 2005b). Loyalty and commitment have received intense attention from the perspective of sport (Bauer *et al.*, 2008; Bauer, Sauer & Schmitt, 2005a; Tapp, 2004) and leisure studies (Iwasaki & Havitz, 2004; 1998; Pritchard, Havitz & Howard, 1999; Backman & Crompton, 1991a; 1991b), and reveal several issues concerning the need to understand psychological commitment and loyalty in sport spectatorship context. Kabiraj (2011:288) believe that commitment is an attitudinal construct and a brand commitment is an emotional or psychological attachment to a brand in a product class, while brand loyalty is a behavioural phenomenon that focuses on the percentage of total purchases or repeat buying sequences.

Several studies (Bauer *et al.*, 2008; Bauer *et al.*, 2005a; Bauer *et al.*, 2005b) indicate that a sport consumer shows high levels of psychological commitment when he/she feels an inner attachment that is persistence over time, resist to conflicting information or experience, and expresses concern for the future value and welfare of that sport team. Dywer (2011b) define psychological commitment as an individual’s attitude strength, a “tendency to resist change in preference in response to conflicting information or experience” and attachment to an object that results recurring behaviour and infers “a rejection of alternative behaviours”. A number of studies (Iwasaki & Havitz, 2004; Mahony Mahony, Madrigal & Howard, 2000; Pritchard *et al.*, 1999; Backman & Crompton, 1991a) have used the psychological commitment construct to explain the attitudinal component of loyalty. Funk, Haugtvedt and Howard (2000) posit that the loyalty construct may be operationalised in terms of attitude strength as an intuitive appeal and would allow sport researchers to conceptually elaborate upon the attribution components of brand loyalty, whereby variations in attitudinal loyalty represent differences in the level of attitude strength.

Since psychological commitment effectively represents the attitudinal component of loyalty, previous studies (Bee & Havitz, 2010; Bauer *et al.*, 2008; Iwasaki & Havitz, 2004; Pritchard *et al.*, 1999) note that commitment may be conceptualised as a psychological construct and equated to the attitudinal component of brand loyalty, which reflects an individual’s psychological commitment to a sport team and explains why a sport fan value and consider a team as meaningful (Funk & James, 2006).

The purpose of the study was to determine the effect of soccer involvement and PSL team identification of African Generation Y students’ PSL team psychological commitment in the South African context.

Methodology

Sample

The target population of this study was African Generation Y students enrolled at South African public higher education institutions (HEIs) in 2014. The sampling frame consisted of the 25 public registered HEIs within Southern Africa by the Higher education in South Africa (HESA, 2014). A judgement sample of three campuses from three HEIs within the Gauteng province was taken from the initial list of 25 registered institutions – one from a traditional university, one from a comprehensive university and one from a university of technology.

A non-probability convenience sample of 402 students across the three campuses (134 per campus) was taken for the main survey from list of the campuses of the public South African higher education institutions (HEIs) situated in the Gauteng province of South Africa. Malhotra (2010) indicates that when maximum likelihood estimation is used, such as with structural equation modelling, the sample size of the study should be between 200 and 400. The Gauteng province was selected because it contained the highest percentage of the South Africa's public HEIs in 2013 than any other South African provinces (Bevan-Dye *et al.*, 2009), is the most densely populated province (Statistics South Africa, 2013) and home to the PSL's two most heavily supported and sponsored teams, namely Kaizer Chiefs and Orlando Pirates (Khumalo, 2009; Moholoa, 2012). Lecturers at each of the three campuses were contacted for permission to distribute the questionnaire to their students during the first or last 15 minutes of their lecture. The nature of the questionnaire was explained to them and an assurance of the confidentiality of the participants' information together with the name of the HEI campus was provided. Once permission had been attained, the questionnaire was administered to students during the pre-agreed upon scheduled lectures. Prior to distributing the questionnaire, the students were informed that their participation in the survey was strictly on a voluntary basis.

Research instrument

This study made use of a self-administered, structured-undisguised questionnaire. Scales drawn from the published research were used to measure soccer involvement (three items) (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998), team identification (six items) (Mael & Ashford, 1992) and (eight items) (Bauer *et al.*, 2008). The questionnaire also contained questions requesting demographic information and a cover letter outlining the purpose of the study. All scaled responses were measured using a six-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree.

In order to assess the reliability of the measurement instrument, the questionnaire was piloted on a convenience sample of 50 Generation Y students not included in the main study. The pilot study returned a Cronbach alpha of 0.803 for soccer involvement, 0.837 for team identification, and 0.919 for the psychological commitment scale, all of which exceeded the acceptable level of being above 0.70 (Malhotra, 2010), thereby indicating good reliability.

The captured data was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and AMOS, Version 22.0 for Windows. The statistical analysis included exploratory principle component analysis and structural equation modelling

Results

Sample description

From 402 questionnaires distributed, 289 completed questionnaires were returned, giving 72% response rate. The majority of the participants were aged between 19 and 21 (69%). The sample included more male (52.0%) than female (48%) participants. While eight of South Africa's nine provinces were represented in the sample, most of the participants indicated that they originated from the Gauteng province (52%) followed by Limpopo (14%), Free State (8%) and Mpumalanga (8%). There were no participants from the Western-Cape province. Of the participants, 7 (2%) failed to indicate from which province they originated.

Exploratory principle component analysis

The construct-related items were included in an exploratory principle component analysis using varimax rotation. The analysis resulted in three factors with eigenvalues greater than one. Of the items, one item from the team identification scale and two items from the psychological commitment scale cross-loaded and were deleted once it had been ascertained that their removal did not substantively alter the construct as originally conceptualised. In the subsequent principle component analysis, the three factors produced with eigenvalues greater than one accounted for 64.45 percent of the total variance. The Cronbach alpha values for all three factors exceeded 0.7, ranging from 0.776 to 0.876, thereby indicating acceptable reliability.

Structural equation modelling

Confirmatory factor analysis was then undertaken on the remaining items, whereby a three-factor measurement model was specified. This model included the latent factors of sport involvement (three indicators), team identification (five indicators) and psychological commitment (six indicators). For model

identification purposes, the first loading on each of the factors was fixed at 1.0. There are 105 distinct sample moments, and 31 parameters to be estimated, which leave 74 degrees of freedom based on an over-identified model. The model was evaluated using composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE) and the goodness-of-fit indices of the chi-square, the standardised root mean residual (SRMR), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), the incremental fit index (IFI), the comparative fit index (CFI), and the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI). In Table 1, the factor loadings, error variances, CR, AVE and correlations are reported.

Table 1: Confirmatory factor analysis

Factors	Factor loadings	Error variances	CR	AVE	$\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$
Involvement (F1)	.90	.80	.796	.571	.76
	.72	.52			
	.62	.38			
Identification (F2)	.75	.56	.845	.523	.72
	.63	.40			
	.75	.56			
	.82	.67			
	.65	.42			
Commitment (F3)	.72	.52	.878	.546	.74
	.73	.53			
	.75	.57			
	.69	.48			
	.77	.59			
	.77	.59			

Correlation coefficients: Involvement (F1) \leftrightarrow Identification (F2): .61 Involvement (F1) \leftrightarrow Commitment (F3): .51; Identification (F2) \leftrightarrow Commitment (F3): .51

The model was evaluated for any problematic estimates, such as negative error variances (known as Heywood cases) and standardised factor loadings above 1.0 or below -1.0 (Hair *et al.*, 2010). As indicated in Table 2, each of the CR values exceeded the recommended 0.70 level, thereby indicating the reliability of the constructs. Furthermore, all factor loadings exceeded the 0.50 level and the AVE values commuted all exceeded 0.50, which suggests convergent reliability (Hair, Black, Babin & Anderson, 2010). In addition, there is evidence of discriminant validity in that the square root of the AVE values are larger than the correlation coefficients (Malhotra, 2010).

In terms of the measurement model fit indices, whilst the chi-square was significant (184.10 (df = 74, $p > 0.01$)), it is known that this statistic is highly sensitive to sample size (Malhotra, 2010:732). The other fit indices show an acceptable degree of fit between the measurement model and the data, with SRMR of 0.057, a RMSEA of 0.07, an IFI of 0.94, a CFI of 0.94, and a TLI of 0.93. As such, the measurement model was deemed as reliable and valid, with an acceptable fit and, therefore, suitable for testing as a structural model.

Based on the measurement model, a structural model was tested wherein it was specified that soccer involvement (F1) and team identification (F2) have a direct positive effect on psychological commitment to a PSL team (F3). The structural model is presented in Figure 1.

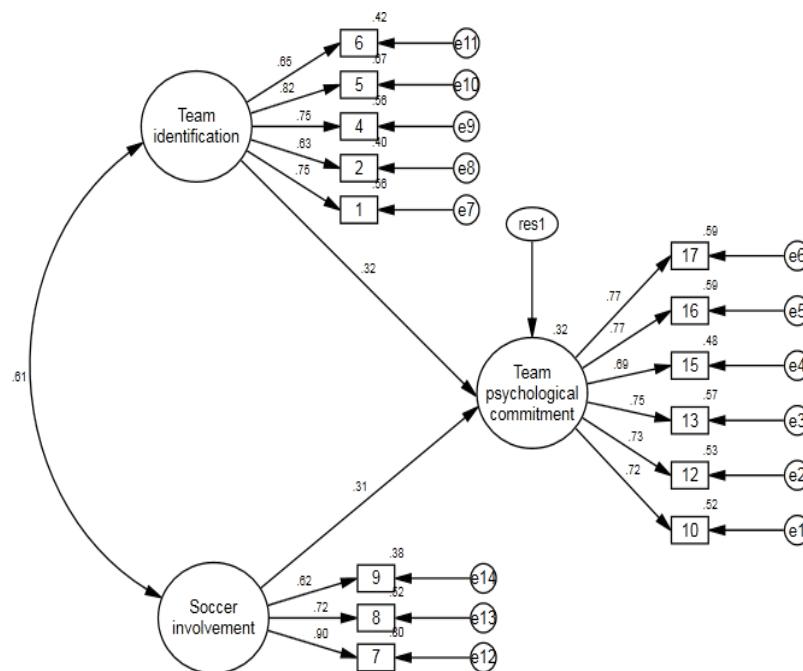


Figure 1: Structural model

Whilst the chi-square remained significant (184.10 (df = 74, $p > 0.01$)), the other fit indices showed an acceptable degree of fit between the structural model and the data, with SRMR of 0.0570, a RMSEA of 0.07, an IFI of 0.94, a CFI of 0.94, and a TLI of 0.93. As is evident from Figure 1, team identification (path estimate=0.000, $p < 0.05$) and soccer involvement (path estimate=0.000, $p < 0.05$) both have a direct significant positive effect on psychological commitment. The squared multiple correlation (SMC) coefficient for sport team psychological commitment is 0.32, which indicates that the two predictors of PSL team identification and soccer involvement explain 32 percent of the variance in African Generation Y students’ PSL team psychological commitment.

Discussion

In South Africa soccer is watched, played and discussed more so than any other sport. The continued success of South Africa's PSL is highly dependent on the league's ability to generate enthusiasm and to remain relevant to the youth, especially amongst members of the African Generation Y cohort who make up the majority of the country's Generation Y segment. This study sought to determine the influence of soccer domain involvement and team identification on African Generation Y students' PSL team psychological commitment. The findings suggest that both soccer involvement and team identification have a significant positive effect on African Generation Y students' psychological commitment to their favourite PSL team. Backman and Crompton (1991a) state that one most discriminating variable regarding loyalty was the level of involvement, and in subsequent study, Backman and Crompton (1991b) found involvement as a significant predictor of attitudinal loyalty or psychological commitment. Involvement has been also found to be positively associated with fan identification (Tsiotsou & Alexandris, 2009; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003:278). Fisher and Wakefield (1998) found that domain involvement was consistently linked with team identification.

In order to attract more members of the African Generation Y cohort, PSL teams need to ensure that they play attractive and competitive soccer that enhances the excitement and entertainment value spectators derive from watching games. The risks associated with underperforming on the soccer field include the potential loss of sponsorships, spectators, television rights and gate takings. Players need to be developed and managed in a manner that will result in competitive teams. Existing fans need to be looked after in a manner that will ensure that they remain loyal and non-soccer followers amongst the African Generation Y cohort should be viewed as a potential growth market. PSL marketers are advised to continue branding their teams in a manner that helps to differentiate the teams in terms of logos, slogans and multi-faceted merchandise. However, they should develop branded merchandise that is attractive to the youth, such as mobile phone covers, peak caps and the like.

Whilst the expense involved in television advertising may make this form of exposure beyond the reach of most of the PSL teams, there are other less expensive platforms that should be considered such as social networking sites and Web advertising. More exposure is likely to strengthen the loyalty of existing fans while simultaneously attracting new fans. Given the importance of soccer domain involvement in fostering team commitment, teams are advised to visit schools and universities in order to generate interest in the game. Running special soccer boot camps at schools is an ideal way of encouraging an interest in the game.

Limitations and implications for future research

As is generally the case, this study has several limitations that should be taken into consideration when interpreting the results. The most salient limitation is that the study employed non-probability convenience sampling, which does not allow for an objective assessment of the exactitude of the sample findings (Malhotra, 2010). Therefore, caution is advised in interpreting these results. Furthermore, even though the sample included respondents from eight of South Africa's nine provinces, the study focused exclusively on the HEI campuses in the Gauteng province. Students registered at university campuses outside the Gauteng province may have different PSL involvement, team identification and psychological commitment behaviours.

Conclusion

In the ever increasing dynamic and competitive world of sports marketing, South Africa's PSL needs to remain vigilant in the way in which they appeal to spectators. Their ability to attract spectators from amongst the African Generation Y cohort will determine their success in the foreseeable future, which, in turn, will help them to continue to attract the lucrative sponsorship and broadcast deals necessary for the league's survival and growth.

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