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Atmosphere in English Football: Relationships with Stadium Characteristics, Supporter Demographics and Moving to a New Ground

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Introduction

English football supporters rate atmosphere as an important feature of the match experience (F.A. Premier League, 2006).

The **primary aim** of this study was to determine if football match atmosphere differed based on 3 variables. **Stadium size** was considered because research indicated a top contributor to 'good atmosphere' was a full capacity, though not necessarily large, crowd (Charleston, in press; 2006). **Length of stadium residency** was included as anecdotal fan reports suggest new grounds are not comparable in atmosphere. It has been suggested **season ticket holders** are responsible for match atmosphere; therefore it was important to determine how views differed by supporter type. The following hypotheses were tested:

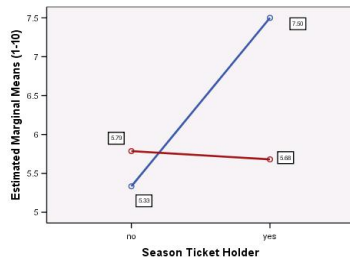
1. Supporters who judged the stadium to be 'small' would rate atmosphere highest, irrespective of actual size;
2. Old stadiums would have higher atmosphere ratings; and
3. Season ticket holders would rate atmosphere at the ground higher than non-season ticket holders.

The **secondary aim** was to determine the effect that moving to a new stadium had on supporters. Historically, fans resist a move, which may indicate strong emotional ties to the ground. It was expected supporters who experienced a move would:

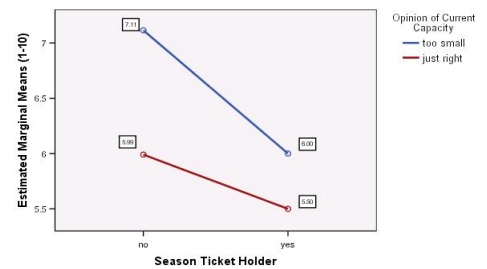
4. Find the closing of the old ground an emotional experience;
5. Not feel atmosphere improved at the new ground; and
6. Larger capacity does not result in better atmosphere.

Results

Mean Overall Ground Atmosphere: New Stadiums



Mean Overall Ground Atmosphere: Old Stadiums



- Supporters who felt the stadium was too small rated atmosphere significantly higher than those who felt the stadium was just the right size, $F(1, 435)=5.50, p<.05$, one-tailed.
- Atmosphere at old stadiums was not significantly different from new stadiums, $F(1, 435)=0.06, p>.05$, one-tailed.
- Season ticket holders and non-season ticket holders rated atmosphere approximately equally, $F(1, 435)=0.13, p>.05$, one-tailed.
- The 3-way interaction between perceived stadium size, stadium age, and season ticket holder status was significant, $F(1, 443)=5.16, p<.01$, one-tailed.
- Season ticket holders at new grounds who felt the ground was too small rated atmosphere highest (7.5, $sd=.61$), followed by non-season ticket holders at old grounds who felt the stadium was too small (7.11, $sd=.21$). All other groups rated atmosphere approximately equally. The lowest atmosphere rating (5.33, $sd=.86$) was by a small group of non-season ticket holders at new stadiums who felt the ground was too small.

Method

Supporters were recruited via independent supporter's club websites for 20 professional English football teams chosen based on length of occupancy at the home ground, as well as 2 general supporter websites. Volunteers ($n=443$) completed a web-survey rating stadium atmosphere, views on ground size, social identification with the team, and for a subset ($n=61$), the impact of their team's stadium move.

The majority of respondents were:

- Male (89%)
- Mean age: 35 years old (range 16-73)

Season ticket holders (53%) for an average of 10.72 years

Respondents represented:

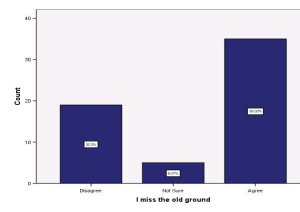
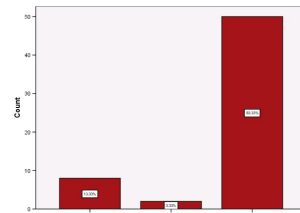
- 26 English football clubs
 - 26.9% Premier league club
 - 71.6% Championship club
 - 1.5% Other divisions

Majority (56%) supported a West Midlands Championship League side. No other team represented by more than 10% of the sample.

Old stadiums tenure: average of 109 years

New stadium tenure: average of 7.7 years

Results (n=59-61)



- Over 83% of supporters who experience a move agreed to some extent with the statement that it was an upsetting experience.

- Views were mixed as to whether the new ground had better atmosphere, with 42% disagreeing to some extent and 41% agreeing at some level to this statement.

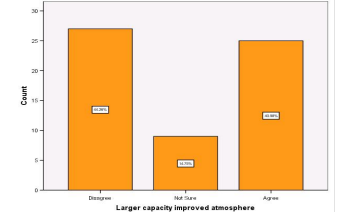
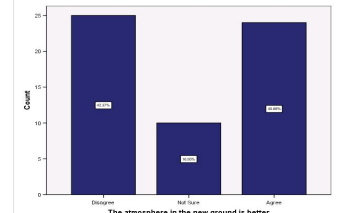
- 59% miss the old ground to a varying degree.

- Only 41% felt the larger capacity of the new stadium improved atmosphere.

- The level of emotional upset related to the ground closure was positively correlated with the length of regular attendance at matches ($r = .36, n=48, p < .01$, one-tailed).

- The attachment to the old ground does not fade with time. Length of time since the move was positively correlated with higher levels of missing the old ground ($r = .22, n=58, p < .05$, one-tailed).

- Supporter team-related social identity was positively associated with feelings that the ground move was more emotional than moving house ($r = .31, n=57, p < .01$, one-tailed).



Conclusion

Variations in Match Atmosphere by Stadium Size, Stadium Age & Season Ticket Holder Status:

- This complex relationship between stadium factors and supporter type indicates that 'one size' does not fit all in terms of stadium design. In fact, it is important to consider what is 'small' or 'large' relative to the supporters expectations. A small stadium to one club's supporters may be viewed as less than ideal to supporters of another club.
- These findings are consistent with prior research. Supporters desire a sense of belonging from the match atmosphere (Charleston, in press); and it could be that this is enhanced in stadiums which feel 'small' because the perception is that they are part of something special. This serves to reinforce several of the 8 underlying motivations for sport fandom identified by Wann (1995).
- These findings are potentially important in terms of home advantage because supporters believe they are the primary source of home advantage (Wolfson, Wakelin, & Lewis, 2005) and they rate match atmosphere as one of the top desires from their attendance. When views of 'good atmosphere' differ, it is crucial that clubs bear this in mind to meet the varied needs of supporter groups. As Bale (1998) suggests, it is the fans which make a stadium 'a place' rather than a container in which a football match occurs.

Moving Grounds Emotionally Impacts Supporters:

- What is very clear is that supporters have a strong emotional bond with the stadium. They find moving grounds to be emotional, and this feeling does not decrease with time. This may be due to the strong place attachment believed to exist to places that represent a persons' social identity (Proshansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1983).
- Larger capacity does not necessarily result in better atmosphere. This suggests that it is not absolute crowd size or the associated noise level from a larger crowd which has the primary impact on atmosphere. In fact, fans were split as to whether atmosphere improved at the new stadium, further illustrating that bigger is not necessarily better.

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