

Building Fan Stickiness in A Small-Market NBA Franchise: Evidence from The New Orleans Pelicans

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Abstract. Fan participation is the core determinant of the sustainable development of professional sports clubs, which is mainly reflected in its impact on the occupancy rate, commodity demand and media value. However, small market teams like the New Orleans Pelicans, despite the popularity of the NBA as a whole, still face ongoing difficulties in developing stable fan loyalty. Given the team's relatively short history, unstable performance cycle and limited heritage, this problem is particularly prominent. This paper explores the structural reasons for the stickiness and vulnerability of fans by combining a targeted review of the literature related to sports brands and fan identity, as well as case studies on the brand image and fan experience of the Pelicans. Analysis shows that the low loyalty of fans is mainly due to the lack of institutionalized identity paths, limited cultural integration in the game day environment, and over-reliance on star-centered interaction methods, which exacerbates the volatility of fan participation. Therefore, the dependence of fans is transactional and very sensitive to fluctuations in short-term performance. Results show that success on the court alone cannot achieve sustainable fan loyalty. On the contrary, long-term loyalty depends on the institutionalization of the fan identity level, the integration of local cultural narratives into the team's brand, and the repositioning of star players within a continuous, team-centered narrative framework. These conclusions emphasize the importance of identity building and experience design as a strategic basis for improving the loyalty of fans in small market sports clubs.

Keywords: Fan stickiness, Fan loyalty, Team identification, Sports branding, Small-market franchise.

1. Introduction

In today's NBA, fan participation is a key factor in the team's sustainable development, which affects revenue sources such as ticket sales, commodity demand and media value. The New Orleans Pelicans highlighted the difficulty of cultivating "fan stickiness" (defined here as the long-term participation and loyalty of fans). Although the NBA is popular, the Pelicans' occupancy rate is often at a lower level in the league; for example, in the 2021-2022 season, New Orleans ranks 24th, with home spectators accounting for only about 92% of the venue's capacity [1]. This phenomenon of low attendance rates despite league-wide popularity reveals a practical and academic gap: compared with old teams with deep traditional roots, the Pelicans have not yet established a lasting and multi-level fan base.

For the Pelicans, it is particularly urgent to strengthen the stickiness of fans, because its team's history is relatively short and the development process is full of twists and turns. Since relocating in 2002 and renaming the Pelicans in 2013 to fit Louisiana, the team has only achieved intermittent competitive success, which limits the accumulation of long-term traditions, which are usually the cornerstone of fan identity. At the same time, the emergence of young stars - especially Zion Williamson, the 2019 top star - provides an opportunity for the team to turn occasional attention into stable loyalty if the team can establish emotional ties beyond the short-term performance cycle. This study explores how a small market NBA team can enhance the stickiness of fans when the performance of the court alone may not ensure continuous support. This paper adopts a combined methodological approach consisting of a literature review and a case study. First of all, a targeted review of the existing literature on sports brands, fan identity and fan loyalty is carried out to identify the key driving factors for the continuous participation of fans. Secondly, a case analysis of the brand image and fan experience of the New Orleans Pelicans is conducted to diagnose structural and cultural barriers to long-term loyalty. By combining previous theoretical insights with the specific situation

of the Pelicans, this study aims to explain the reasons for the continued vulnerability of fan loyalty and put forward an operable strategy with identity construction and experience design as the core to enhance the long-term sense of belonging of fans.

2. Brief History and Current Status of the Pelicans

The New Orleans Pelicans are a relatively young team in the NBA. Its development has been full of unstable factors, which has brought many challenges to the interaction between the team and fans. Since moving to New Orleans in 2002, the team has experienced many turmoils, including a temporary relocation after Hurricane Katrina, several ownership changes, and the team's name change in 2013 to the Pelicans [2]. Although the name change aims to make the team closer to the native characteristics of Louisiana, it also marks a symbolic reset of the team's tradition and historical continuity. In the past two decades, the team's limited performance in the playoffs and the lack of a period of continuous competitiveness have limited the development of intergenerational fan groups and the formation of stable collective identity among supporters.

In recent years, the Pelicans' competitive prospects and fan participation indicators have shown gradual progress, but there is continued vulnerability. The young core team led by Zion Williamson and Brandon Ingram has brought several outbreaks of enthusiasm, especially during the playoff sprint stage and highlight performance. However, due to the frequent injuries of star players and the instability of their performance, these critical moments have failed to translate into a continuous growth of the fan base. As a small market team, the sports loyalty of the city where it is located has long been focused on the Saints of the NFL. The Pelicans have been difficult to get steady attention. The number of viewers, TV ratings and digital interaction indicators are all lower than the league average, indicating that although interest may increase under favorable conditions, long-term fan loyalty has not reached a stable balance.

3. Key Challenges in Building Fan Loyalty

Despite the increasing interest of fans, it is difficult for the New Orleans Pelicans to turn a brief focus into lasting fan loyalty. This vulnerability does not stem from a single defect, but from a series of interrelated structural and cultural restrictions that restrict how fans can form, deepen and maintain their sense of identity with the team. The following analysis points out the main challenges that prevent the team from building lasting fan loyalty.

3.1. Structural and Cultural Deficits in Fan Identity Formation

A key factor in the New Orleans Pelicans' difficulty in retaining fans is the structural and cultural defects in the formation of fan identity. Although the loyalty of fans is often regarded as a by-product of performance, extensive research in the field of sports marketing and the theory of social identity show that continuous loyalty depends on the existence of institutionalized ways, so that fans can gradually deepen their sense of identity with the team. However, in the case of the Pelicans, such pathways have not been fully developed, which limits the process of changing from mere interest to lasting loyalty [3,4].

Structurally speaking, the team lacks a clear loyalty infrastructure and cannot officially recognize the participation of fans at different levels. The lack of a graded membership system, symbolic rewards or progress-based incentives means that fans rarely receive signals that their continued support is recognized or valued. Therefore, participation is more transactional - around ticket purchase rather than identity enhancement - making it difficult for fans to change from marginal participation to core belonging [5]. Without these institutional mechanisms, the fan group will show fragmented characteristics and rely heavily on the short-term performance results of the game.

From a cultural point of view, these structural defects are also reinforced by the lack of shared rituals, traditions and symbols with emotional resonance in the game day experience. The relatively

short and unstable team history of the Pelicans, coupled with rebranding and unstable successful performance, limits the establishment of a stable tradition, thus binding the formation of collective identity. This shortcoming is reflected in the dull atmosphere of the stadium and the lack of unique fan ceremonies that usually promote a sense of collective belonging [6]. Therefore, watching the Pelicans' game often lacks the sense of collective participation with deep fan culture support.

Overall, the lack of loyalty programs, recognizable rituals and a vibrant stadium environment reflect a common potential problem: fans do not have an institutionalized way to deepen their identity over time. Without the mechanism of rewarding commitments or strengthening cultural practices of common significance, the attachment of fans will become fragile and vulnerable. This structural and cultural difference helps to explain why it is difficult for the pelicans' fan group to form a strong cohesion. The enthusiasm for participation of fans will rise when the team's performance is excellent, but once the team's performance declines, this enthusiasm will quickly subside.

3.2. Overreliance on Star Players and Volatile Fan Engagement

For the New Orleans Pelicans, one of the factors that further weakens fan loyalty is the team's over-reliance on star players to promote fan participation. Although star players play a central role in attracting attention in the NBA, excessive concentration of participation patterns on individual players will greatly increase the volatility of fan loyalty. When the fan's interest is completely dependent on a specific character, the degree of participation is highly sensitive to factors such as injury, performance fluctuations or eventual departure.

The recent experience of the Pelicans reflects this dynamic. Periods of high attention are often closely related to the appearance and availability of top players, especially those represented by Zion Williamson. His arrival triggered a great sense of excitement and brought about an increase in short-term occupancy and demand for goods; however, the long-term absence caused by injury was accompanied by a significant decrease in the number of spectators and a decline in overall participation. This model shows that the participation of fans is based on the availability of individual stars, not on the stable sense of belonging to the team as a whole. From a theoretical point of view, the influence of celebrities alone is not enough to maintain long-term loyalty. Research on the brand effect of athletes shows that although star players can improve their popularity and emotional intensity, their impact on the team's lasting loyalty is limited unless it is regulated through a deeper sense of identity [7,8]. Star-centered storytelling will not be attractive unless it is used together with a strong sense of team identity, collective rituals or institutionalized loyalty paths. The lack of these features reduces fan loyalty and engagement. This is largely because their interests change with performance of star players.

In addition, overemphasis on stars undermines other valuable points, such as team spirit and player identity. When fans have no motivation to watch a game in the absence of stars, their loyalty becomes conditional rather than long-lasting.

Overall, these challenges reveal a fan participation model revealing weak identification. Therefore, addressing these weaknesses is crucial for the franchise to turn short-term interest into long-term fan loyalty.

3.3. Strengths and Opportunities for Enhancing Fan Stickiness

Certain advantages of the franchise bring opportunities for its development. To begin with, young players took up a large portion of the team. If the team can this resource beyond the description of short-term performance, they will improve in fan base and emotional connection. Unlike those old teams that need immediate success to maintain attention, the Pelicans, as a developing team, can make fans gradually have a sense of belonging over time rather than through performance only.

The lineup of the Pelicans is in line with the general trend of the contemporary NBA fan community, that is, young spectators are more connected to the team through the growth process of players and ever-changing narratives, rather than relying on the existing glorious history [9]. In this case, even if the team does not have the ambition to compete for the championship, continuous

competitiveness can enhance loyalty by proving that fans' long-term investment is reasonable. Therefore, as long as growth is conveyed as part of the team narrative, not just attributed to individual stars, regular playoff appearances and obvious progress are enough to enhance the identity of fans. In addition to the factors on the field, the geographical and cultural background of the team also provides an underutilized opportunity to solve the existing lack of identity. New Orleans has a unique cultural environment and strong community tradition. If it is systematically integrated into the team's branding and game day experience, it can provide fans with a way to identify independently of performance. Cultural authenticity (rather than general entertainment) has been proven to enhance emotional connection and reduce sensitivity to short-term fluctuations, which is especially valuable for small market teams.

Finally, the change in the sports consumption pattern of young fans has further expanded opportunity for the Pelicans. Digital interaction, experiential fan culture and value-based identification are increasingly affecting the formation and maintenance of loyalty [10]. Since this is a relatively young team with no deep traditional roots, the Pelicans face fewer institutional restrictions in adapting to these models. By emphasizing real story narration, community integration and participatory fan experience, the team can transform fragmented attention into a more stable attachment relationship, which can supplement rather than rely on the attention brought by stars.

3.4. A Comparative Mini-Case: The Memphis Grizzlies as a Small-Market Counterexample

In order to more comprehensively illustrate the challenges, the New Orleans Pelicans face, it is useful to compare them with another NBA small market team. The Memphis Grizzlies is a counterexample. Like New Orleans, Memphis is also in a small media market, without a long history of championships, and has difficulty reaching global fan groups. However, despite these similarities, the Grizzlies have developed a more stable and tenacious fan base in the past decade.

A key difference is the establishment of team identity. The Grizzlies have always been committed to creating a clear and unified team image - this image is often reflected in expressions such as "tenacity and hard work" - this image transcends individual players and can also exist during the team's lineup changes. This image has been integrated into brand promotion, media publicity, and the ceremony of the game day, so that fans can resonate with the team even during the transition or reconstruction period. In contrast, the team image of the Pelicans is more scattered, and the participation of fans often focuses on the development trajectory of individual stars, rather than the common collective spirit.

This comparison does not mean that the Grizzlies' model is universally applicable. On the contrary, it shows that in the face of similar resource restrictions, small market teams may have significant differences in fan loyalty due to whether identity shaping is institutionalized and integrated into culture.

4. Strategic Recommendations and Solutions

In order to address the structural and cultural obstacles mentioned above, the Pelicans must change from a participation model based on game performance to a model that can institutionalize fan identification. The following suggestions aim to build a stable path for the formation of loyalty, strengthen the sense of collective identity, and reduce the volatility of fans' participation.

4.1. Institutionalize Tiered Fan Identification Pathways

The Pelicans should establish a formal and hierarchical fan participation system so that fans can gradually deepen their sense of identity with the team. This system should not divide fans into two completely different states of "supporters" and "non-supporters", but should recognize different degrees of belonging and provide symbolic and experiential signs to show the improvement of their status among the fan community.

From a theoretical point of view, the hierarchical loyalty structure, as a way of institutionalization, can transform repeated participation into the strengthening of identity. By rewarding recognition rather than attendance, this system encourages fans to make their sense of belonging to the team as part of self-awareness. For the Pelicans, this solution will directly address the problem of low lasting engagement.

4.2. Strengthen Collective Identity Through Cultural Integration

The pelicans should integrate the local culture of New Orleans into the team's symbolic and game environment. For example, building a culture museum or gallery inside their stadium with Louisiana history and Fleur-de-lis symbols. This shift fan loyalty from individual players to a shared identity based on community recognition.

Cultural integration can build a sense of identity beyond the team's lineup changes or game outcomes. When fans connect the team with a broader cultural perspective, their dependence on the results of the game is reduced.

4.3. Rebalance Star-Centered Engagement with Narrative Continuity

Although star players are still important to catch attention, the Pelicans should reposition their personal stories to a team-centered narrative framework. They can achieve this by recording the growth of players, their community participation on social media such as X and Instagram.

Research on the branding of athletes shows that when positive emotion from star players is conveyed through team identity, it has better effect on promoting the team's long-term loyalty. This allows fans to stay engaged even when star players are injured or underperforming.

Overall, these strategies aim to transform the Pelicans' fan base from short-term consumption to continuous recognition. Therefore, the team can form a more resilient fan base. This transformation is crucial in improving the loyalty of fans in a small market environment.

5. Conclusion

Taking the New Orleans Pelicans as an example, this study explores the vulnerability of the fan loyalty in this NBA team of small market size. Analysis showed that their weak fan engagement is not due to awful performances but a flaw inside the formation of their team identity and relation with fans.

The research results show that there are three interrelated factors that restrict the development of sustainable fan loyalty. First of all, the lack of institutionalized and hierarchical identity paths makes it impossible for fans to gradually deepen their sense of belonging, which leads to the fact that the participation behavior is mainly in the nature of transactions and dependence on performance. Secondly, the limited cultural integration in the game day environment limits the formation of shared rituals, traditions and collective meanings, which usually stabilize the identity of fans over time. Third, reliance on star performance makes fan engagement vulnerable because loyalty is dependent on the performance of individual players rather than on the whole team. Together, this reflects that their fan participation model is weak and highly sensitive to player performances.

Based on these findings, the study proposes a shift from a performance-oriented model to an identity-based loyalty model. A leveled fan loyalty program can transform repeated participation into formation of emotional bonds and identification; Integrating local cultural narratives into the team guarantees stable engagement ignoring team results. Rebalancing the star-centered narrate with a team-oriented framework can further reduce volatility by putting individual success into a broader context of culture and meaning. Together, these strategies emphasize the importance of building identity as an important foundation for long-term fan stickiness for small-market franchises.

The significance of this research is that it helps people understand that fan loyalty is created through culture and engagement, not just sports performance. By emphasizing the role of identity

mechanism, the study provides practical guidance for sports organizations seeking sustainable development in a highly competitive market.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. This analysis is based on a single case study and mainly relies on qualitative analysis rather than original empirical data. Future research can expand this framework by comparing multiple teams and using first-hand empirical data.

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