

Beyond the 90 minutes: football, tourism and hospitality

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ABSTRACT: This study is the first in a series looking at professional sports franchises and their forays into the realms of hospitality, leisure and tourism. It focuses on the city of Leeuwarden in the north of The Netherlands and its professional football club, SC Cambuur, competing in the elite tier of Dutch football, the *Eredivisie*, during the 2022/23 season. Leeuwarden is becoming an increasingly recognised tourism destination, particularly since 2018 when it was the European Capital of Culture. Its football club operates on the fringes of the visitor economy, but in relocating to a newly built state-of-the-art stadium, it is keen to establish its tourism and hospitality credentials alongside the more traditional actors in the sector. Using content analysis, the article examines the current state of play across the *Eredivisie* and its professional clubs by providing an inventory of the leisure and hospitality operations offered. It also assesses whether the clubs and their stadia are considered for their tourism potential by destination-marketing organisations. It captures a moment in time that acts as a benchmark for SC Cambuur going forward and reveals an organisation that follows a tried-and-trusted template, replicated throughout professional football in The Netherlands, in exploiting its somewhat limited facilities for the purposes of hospitality and leisure. The Leeuwarden club's operations are still relatively modest compared to many of its competitors, and it barely registers as a noteworthy partner for the tourism authorities. Despite significant challenges in recent times, the relocation to the new stadium, confirmed for 2024, leaves it well placed to expand its activities in the areas of hospitality and leisure.

KEYWORDS: benchmarking, Dutch sport, facilities, football stadia, leisure

Introduction

Each year, from September to late May, the continent of Europe buckles down for the trials and tribulations of the football (soccer) season. Teams compete practically every weekend, and sometimes twice per week, in contests that are attended by a huge number of spectators and followed by even more people beyond the confines of the stadia. From Scotland to the Balkans, the ebb and flow of games receives generous media coverage and makes for animated discussion in cafés, bars, offices, factories and schoolyards across the planet. The Manchester derby in England, pitting United against City, is said to attract an audience of close to one billion people and is broadcast in 189 countries (Ishola, 2022). The stadia themselves are packed to capacity for such events, with tickets exchanging hands on the black market for astronomical sums. The games can be pulsating and dramatic, or tense and boring, yet the vast audience hangs on to every moment of play for the 90-plus minutes of the contest. Once the final whistle sounds, spectators exit and the stadia become cavernous bowels of emptiness and dormancy until the next contest arises; well, not quite.

In seeking to increase turnover and create other significant sources of income, professional sports clubs have diversified their value propositions and branched out into what can only be described as the fields of hospitality, tourism and leisure

(Edensor & Millington, 2010). Stadia have been transformed from mono- to multi-purpose locations that appeal to locals and visitors. They have become meeting points offering services and spaces for socialising, leisure, entertainment and culture. Old Trafford, home of Manchester United, is a must-see visitor attraction in Manchester with tours of the club's museum and stadium conducted throughout the year (Proctor, 2022). Tour operators deposit busloads of visitors on a daily basis who capture the moment taking photos and videos that are widely disseminated over social media. The visitors explore the club's restaurants, event spaces and retail outlets, often brushing shoulders with conference attendees, wedding goers, cultural anthropologists, football fans and starry-eyed children hoping to meet their idols. Similarly, FC Barcelona's Nou Camp stadium is thronged with visitors almost every day of the year, sampling comparable fare, only in more clement weather (Ginesta, 2017).

In developing diversification beyond the matchday experience, professional sports clubs not only seek to bolster their own finances, but offer local employment opportunities. These are often the driving forces behind entrepreneurs establishing ancillary businesses and frequently provide the impetus for rejuvenating the neighbourhoods where stadia are located. Depending on the club's national or international cachet, it can also be a critical factor in defining a destination image that can be used for wider benefits across the "tourismscape" (Van der

Duim, 2007). In locations such as those featured in this study, the professional sports club is rarely such a pivotal force in shaping a destination image, neither is it the most noteworthy tourist attraction, yet it fulfils a role that exhibits great potential both for the club itself and local authorities interested in promoting a more resilient tourism economy.

This research lays the foundation for a longitudinal study exploring the intersection of professional sports clubs with tourism, hospitality and leisure. In investigating the current state of play around the Dutch *Eredivisie* (elite football competition), the work charts the efforts of professional football clubs in respect of their leisure and hospitality facilities. It also explores whether they are considered of interest for their tourism potential by destination marketing organisations (DMOs). Describing the contemporary landscape, it provides an inventory of current market offerings that can be used as a benchmark for the research's principal focus: SC Cambuur, located in Leeuwarden, Friesland, The Netherlands.

The city has become an increasingly recognised tourism destination, particularly since 2018 when it was selected as the European Capital of Culture. SC Cambuur's current home offers options for visitors that fall under the banner of hospitality, but with its future relocation to a new state-of-the-art stadium, the possibilities are greatly expanded. Further research in this series intends to build on this work and explore the evolution of SC Cambuur and its aspirations in the field of hospitality, leisure and tourism, along with the impact of this on the city of Leeuwarden. It will also seek to identify best practices and pitfalls encountered that should prove of interest for clubs and tourism authorities in locations sharing similar characteristics.

Blurred lines: community or corporate?

Faced with the ever-increasing commodification of sport (Bodet & Chanavat, 2010), football's major professional clubs have seized on the opportunities afforded them to diversify into areas of commerce that hitherto might have been considered unfathomable. Richelieu and Desbordes (2009) suggest that sports franchises, such as Real Madrid, FC Barcelona and Manchester United, have outgrown community roots and have transformed into iconic global brands that are instantly recognisable. Smaller clubs with seemingly less glamorous sporting credentials have followed a similar pathway in merchandising their reputation, facilities and philosophy. FC Saint Pauli, playing in Germany's second tier, springs to mind as an example of such, illustrating the potential for clubs at different ends of the vast football spectrum (Daniel & Kassimeris, 2013).

How this situation initially arose is etched into the sport's historical narrative that unfortunately is rooted in significant loss of life in stadia which is a result of poor organisation, dilapidated infrastructure and hooliganism (Pearson, 2012). Football has enjoyed a place as the world's most popular sport for some time (Murray, 1998), but negativity surrounding it reached its nadir in the 1980s following disasters at the Heysel stadium in Brussels, Belgium, and at Hillsborough in Sheffield, England. The game's reputation went into freefall with attendance plummeting and the authorities imposing ever stricter regulations on clubs and fans of the game. The sport was almost unrecognisable as the attraction it is today.

Government regulations meant that stadia had to be redesigned. The wide open terraces of yesteryear were largely

abolished in favour of all-seater facilities that were safer and easier to police. In the UK, BSkyB, a major sports broadcaster, identified a turning of the tide and bought the television rights to the then burgeoning English Premier League (Andrews, 2003). It packaged the sport as a family game, not simply for broadcasters, but for those in physical attendance where safety was paramount, while also providing for a compelling atmospheric spectacle. Lucrative money-making deals were concluded between clubs, leagues, broadcasters, sponsors and players. The era of the *Galaticos* was borne (Haynes, 2008) with star players such as David Beckham and Cristiano Ronaldo forging substantial personal commercial empires on the back of their fame and the sport's exploding popularity.

In 2014, the Spanish giants Real Madrid and FC Barcelona announced ambitious plans for the remodelling of their respective iconic stadia. The work is ongoing almost ten years later. The Nou Camp stadium (Barcelona) is closed for renovation until late 2024, illustrating the complexity of significant stadium upgrades as teams compete in season-long competitions while looking to minimise inconvenience for the match-going fans (Gunter, 2011). Similar projects are common across the stadia in Europe's major leagues with numerous clubs having refurbished, remodelled, or built new facilities. That they persevere with such developments is testament to their commercial potential occupying a curious space where sport, tourism and hospitality meet with opportunities for increasing brand exposure across the digital landscape and through lucrative sponsorship deals (Ginesta, 2017).

In the United Kingdom, London's Tottenham Hotspur football club took possession of its new stadium in 2019 at a cost in excess of €1 billion. With a 62 000 all-seater capacity, it contains 65 food and beverage outlets, a micro-brewery and meeting spaces that can hold up to 2 000 guests at any one time (BBC, 2019). According to *Marca* (2019), the museum at Real Madrid's Santiago de Bernabeu stadium is the city's most profitable and third-most visited museum, in a city that is also home to the world famous Prado art museum. The synergy between football and media, coinciding with the transition from modern to postmodern stadia, as described by Paramio et al. (2008), has undoubtedly led the way in making these venues more than the sum of their respective parts. The suspense of the sporting spectacle aside (Ferguson & Lakhani, 2021), the proliferation of options in and around stadia from retail to cultural or culinary, among others, has opened up football to audiences with only a passing interest in the sport. The cultural mores of the age, wrapped in the gauze of aspirational identity, playing out in the arena of social media, occupy one end of a continuum where the stadium and its facilities are consumed to confirm status on the individual (Dinhopl & Gretzl, 2016). From influencer to everyday fan, the ubiquitous "selfie" is almost a rite of passage for individuals advertising their presence at many football grounds. Ultimately, the goal of the clubs is to generate additional revenue streams to guarantee a more stable return on investment (Buraimo et al., 2006). Such strategic thinking led Juventus, Italy's most venerable football club, to downsize from its 70 000 capacity but antiquated stadium, replacing it with a more compact ultra-modern facility that has taken the name of its main sponsor, the Allianz insurance company in a deal worth over €75 million. The new stadium, much like those of its counterparts across Europe's main leagues, is replete with multiple leisure and entertainment choices (Lekakis, 2018).

Indeed, the exploitation of sports stadia as commercial assets whose value extends beyond that of matchday has become *de rigueur* for the professional sports franchise. The 21st century consumer, avid sports fan or not, practically expects these locations to provide options. This has led some researchers, such as Crawford (2004), to suggest that these facilities have been subject to "mall-ification". The author describes this as sports venues using tactics and cues that have worked successfully in other locales such as shopping malls, where the end consumer feels confident in experiencing an environment that is both familiar and reassuring. Unfortunately, one downside is that stadia often assume an air of bland homogeneity, according to Feddersen and Maennig (2009). The clubs themselves rarely overtly refer to this phenomenon as anything other than enhancing the fan experience since in some quarters the cookie cutter approach to stadium design (Chalip, 2006) and the increasing visibility of retail outlets and hospitality venues into these spaces have not been welcomed with open arms. Traditionalists are quick to blame these relatively modern developments for the dilution of fan culture which is rooted in local communities that has evolved over generations. Paradoxically, such authenticity reflected in fan culture is what often appeals to visitors and is used by destination marketing organisations (DMOs) in certain locations to enrich the visitor experience (Cordina et al., 2019). Many clubs offer stadium tours and host museums that celebrate the heritage and history of their organisations. This feeds into the zeitgeist of the authenticity much sought after by the traveling public (Rickly-Boyd, 2012).

Crawford (2004) advises that sports stadia should not be so limited as to be considered solely as sites of consumption. In conjunction with the sports brand, they can play a role in city branding, offering a combination of attributes that may allow for competitive advantages (Allan et al., 2007). Additionally, stadia and facilities, when properly managed, extend benefits across a broader stakeholder environment that transcends the sports clubs themselves and the objectives of DMOs. They provide local employment opportunities, spaces for networking, possibilities for ancillary business development, improved transport infrastructure and, in certain cases, are (surprisingly) lauded as examples of best practice relating to sustainability (Proctor, 2022). The Johan Crujff Arena in Amsterdam is an example of such. It is powered by 4 200 solar panels and is practically carbon neutral.

In The Netherlands, this stadium, home to the country's most renowned club, AFC Ajax, provides fans and the visiting public with a myriad of entertainment options catering to a diversity of tastes, not unlike those experienced at other major football stadia throughout Europe. This situation is mirrored to a certain degree across the clubs and stadia populating The Netherlands' elite football league, the *Eredivisie*. Many of the facilities encroach on the field of hospitality, while others, such as museums and stadium tours, stand firmly in the realm of tourism, "edutainment" and cultural heritage (Wright, 2019). It is against such a backdrop that this study explores the domain where sport, tourism and hospitality overlap, and with it, the opportunities afforded the actors who find themselves both literally and figuratively on the periphery of this space, as is the case of Leeuwarden's SC Cambuur. This is an area currently under-served by the literature yet worthy of investigation.

Method

This initial overview of Dutch football and its hospitality and tourism landscape forms the basis for a longitudinal study into SC Cambuur and its aspirations in the domain as it relocates to a purpose-built modern stadium. It considers the current state of play, both at the Leeuwarden club and across its competitive set in The Netherlands. The population essentially consists of the clubs (and their stadia) participating in the Dutch *Eredivisie* competition for the 2022/23 season and the local tourism authorities linked to the city or region where each club is located.

Content analysis was used to investigate the extent of football clubs activities in the areas of hospitality, tourism and leisure, whether that be through the provision of catering and restaurant services, meeting spaces, museums, stadium tours, or other leisure activities. Content analysis is suitable for the analysis of texts, documents and audio-visual messages. It reduces content, enabling the researcher to identify categories in a systematic manner (Krippendorff, 2004). It can be applied to a wide variety of media and generally aims at providing objective descriptions of these categories (Vitouladiti, 2014). Content analysis is a reliable and simple technique that is unobtrusive, inexpensive and scores high in ease of replication. For the purposes of this study, it is ideally suited to gathering and organising the data and their subsequent treatment.

The websites of the clubs themselves were first considered as sources of data for the analysis. We then explored websites linked to their respective stadia and/or specifically geared towards events held on site. The ease of access to the websites provides these organisations with a platform to showcase their facilities to actual and prospective consumers. Thirdly, and where possible, the content of local tourism authority websites was examined to ascertain if the clubs figure as attractions forming part of the tourism value proposition in the city or region.

Findings

This section highlights the current landscape in the Dutch *Eredivisie* and depicts how the league's sports franchises compare and differ. The use of content analysis resulted in clear themes emerging, particularly related to the scale and reach of clubs. The larger the stadium, the greater the market offering and the subsequent overlap into the domain of tourism and other services. The websites linked to the clubs and their stadia were examined and at first showcased the generic hospitality offerings in relation to facilities available. This was then followed by a clear orientation in how these were packaged to attract business clientele. The themes identified thus relate to hospitality services and the propensity for clubs to gear their offerings to cater to the business sector. Another objective of the research was to explore the extent to which clubs and facilities featured on third-party websites of tourism bodies, which can be linked to whether the stadia house museums and tours, as suggested by Edensor et al. (2021).

Hospitality orientation

An examination of the club websites and others linked to the various stadia detected a proliferation of products and services offered that are closely associated with the domain of hospitality. This became so apparent that it was deemed expedient to identify the phenomenon using the term

"hospitality orientation". Figure 1 illustrates this with Ajax at one end of the scale offering a huge range of hospitality options at its stadium and clubs, and Go Ahead Eagles occupying the other extreme with a more limited range of choices. A cross section of the types of services proffered are referred to in the following sub-sections.

Hospitality/dining facilities

All stadia, regardless of size, provide on-site catering. The most ubiquitous form of this is through the provision of snack and drink kiosks around stadia and on concourses that are available to the match-going public on game day or when concerts take place. The range varies from traditional Dutch snack fare through to a wider variety of options at the larger venues. Many of these outlets appear to be outsourced. Dining, including fine dining options, are offered at all venues. While many of these include well-known branded restaurants, open to the public and operating on a daily basis, others are private dining venues that can be booked for match days or for special occasions such as birthday parties, etc.

Meeting or convention spaces

All stadia provide options for meeting spaces, ranging from more intimate settings, for relatively few participants, to extensive ballrooms hosting up to 3 000 people, such as at FC Utrecht. The venues are generally multipurpose facilities that can cater for business meetings, furnished with the latest digital technology,

and have spaces geared to welcoming galas, weddings, or other events. These generally include catering and entertainment options. The target audience for the facilities is broad, ranging from those interested in hosting events for children to the more lucrative corporate sector.

Other uses (concerts, etc.)

Twelve of the eighteen stadia studied host large concerts such as musical acts, or have done so in the past. When concerts take place, stadium capacity is often enlarged due to the playing field area being made accessible as a vantage point for concert goers. It was unclear whether all typical services available on football matchdays are provided. The music concerts invariably feature headline acts of international repute and/or involve renowned local artists.

Business orientation

The second emergent theme revealed the extent to which the clubs sought out and provided services to the business/corporate sector in ensuring their venues enjoyed high occupancy and operational levels. The term "business orientation" was selected to depict this. As illustrated in Figure 2, Ajax can again be considered to set the benchmark, although all clubs actively engage with corporate clients and partners in seeking to optimise the use of facilities. Some of the services and facilities available are referred to below.

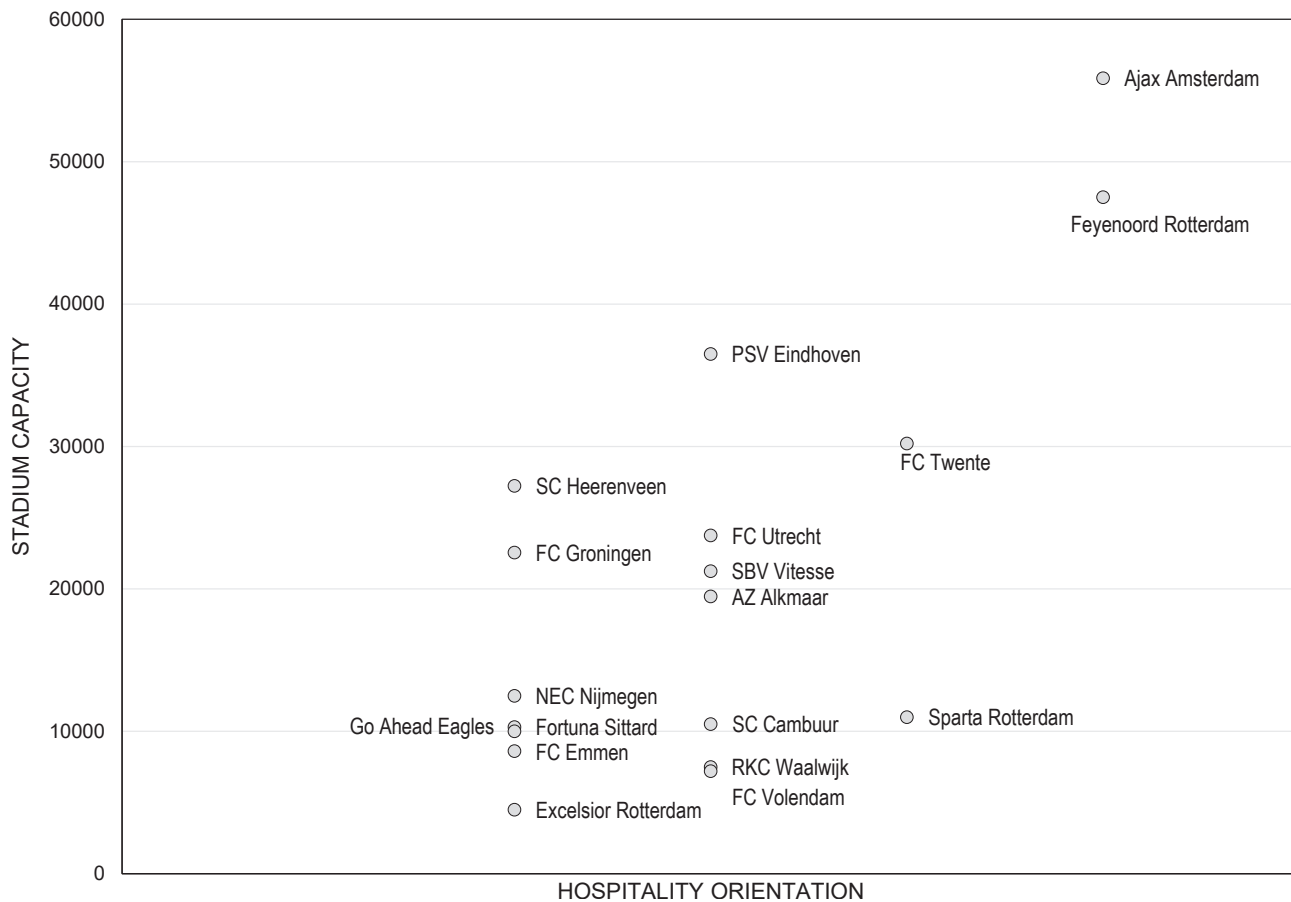


FIGURE1. Hospitality orientation



FIGURE 2. Business orientation

Skyboxes

In the English-speaking world, these are also referred to as corporate hospitality or VIP boxes (Ginesta, 2017). Most Dutch stadia offer a version of such facilities, but the differences are significant. SC Cambuur and the Excelsior club provide business seats that contrast vastly with the facilities at Ajax, PSV Eindhoven, or Feyenoord, where corporate boxes are coveted and prohibitively expensive for the average football fan or visitor. The offering invariably includes pre- and post-game catering services and/or private dining. The provision of skyboxes appears related to stadium capacity and spatial challenges, although one of the smaller stadia, Sparta Rotterdam, features 34 individual skyboxes.

Event companies/business meetings

Each stadium actively promotes and hosts business meetings with an emphasis on providing its facilities for team-building exercises. These frequently consist of tailor-made programmes that are promoted via the club's events department, where one exists. FC Utrecht stands out in this regard, with its own on-site event company energetically targeting businesses. Meetings make use of a cross section of facilities, from large convention spaces to the more intimate setting of skyboxes or a stadium's restaurants and lounges. Practically all clubs emphasise the sporting characteristics of each venue, with a particular focus on incorporating access to behind-the-scenes football-related areas

of the stadia such as changing rooms, player lounges, press rooms and the actual playing surface itself.

Partners/sponsors

The findings show that all except one club are commercially linked to companies that operate in the hospitality, travel, or food and drink sectors. Significantly large beer brands such as Heineken, Amstel, Jupiler, Grolsch and Bavaria are omnipresent throughout the *Eredivisie*, with every club (except one for which no information was available) either sponsored by or partnered with a beer brand. The commercial links are highlighted at the extreme end with FC Twente incorporating the Grolsch brand in the naming of its stadium. Tourism Union International (TUI) and other travel companies feature prominently as commercial partners, as do smaller, more localised food and hospitality businesses, with the Holland Casino group a partner for a number of clubs.

Club heritage and DMO recognition

An important aspect of the research was to uncover whether the clubs or their stadia were visible and promoted across the websites of the respective official tourism authorities. The findings show that stadium tours and museums are clearly important for many of these organisations who seek to safeguard and showcase their heritage (Table 1). The literature suggests that DMOs often make use of these elements in promoting

TABLE 1. Club heritage and destination marketing organisation (DMO) recognition

Club name	Location	Venue	Seating capacity	Museum	Tours	DMO website integration
Ajax Amsterdam	Amsterdam	Johan Crujff Arena	55 865	Yes	Yes	Medium
AZ Alkmaar	Alkmaar	AFAS Stadion	19 478	Yes	Yes	Low
SC Cambuur	Leeuwarden	Cambuur Stadion	10 500	No	Yes	None
FC Emmen	Emmen	De Oude Meerdijk	8 600	Yes	No	None
Excelsior Rotterdam	Rotterdam	Van Donge and De Roo Stadion	4 500	No	No	None
Feyenoord Rotterdam	Rotterdam	De Kuip	47 500	Yes	Yes	Low
Fortuna Sittard	Sittard	Fortuna Sittard Stadion	10 300	Yes	No	None
Go Ahead Eagles	Deventer	De Adelaarshorst	10 000	Unclear	Yes	None
FC Groningen	Groningen	Euroborg	22 550	Yes	Yes	None
SC Heerenveen	Heerenveen	Abe Lenstra Stadion	27 224	Yes	Yes	Low
NEC Nijmegen	Nijmegen	Goffertstadion	12 500	Yes	Yes	None
PSV Eindhoven	Eindhoven	Philips Stadion	36 500	Yes	Yes	Low
RKC Waalwijk	Waalwijk	Mandemakers Stadion	7 500	No	No	None
Sparta Rotterdam	Rotterdam	Spartastadion Het Kasteel	11 000	Yes	Yes	Low
FC Twente	Enschede	De Grolsch Veste	30 205	Yes	Yes	Low
FC Utrecht	Utrecht	Stadion Galgenwaard	23 750	Yes	Yes	Low
SBV Vitesse	Arnhem	GelreDome	21 248	Yes	Yes	Low
FC Volendam	Volendam	Kras Stadion	7 384	Unclear	Yes	None

destinations to certain audiences. displays how this is reflected across the *Eredivisie* and whether DMOs are actively engaged with the football clubs. This is based on the website content categorised according to its intention (Proctor et al., 2018). High levels of engagement suggest that the DMOs actively promote the club and football stadia as a significant component of a destination's tourism attractions. Medium engagement occurs where the club and its facilities warrant a mention as one of many tourism attractions, with low engagement listing the stadium purely for informational purposes.

Museums and stadium tours

The results showcase the importance of club history and providing visitors the opportunity of participating in a stadium tour. Only two relatively small clubs, RKC Waalwijk and Excelsior, appear to not offer the option of a stadium tour, nor do they have club-related museums. The remaining 16 teams provide at least one of these options, with 11 offering a frequently combined package of visiting both the club museum and a stadium tour. Access to these attractions varies greatly. The Johan Crujff Arena has a dedicated department that administers both and is open to the public on an almost daily basis. At the other end of the spectrum, SC Cambuur's stadium tour is not openly promoted, but can be organised through the club's events department, provided sufficient notice is given. The inclusion of a museum and tour is interesting from a visitor perspective since these would appear to meet the criteria of Timothy and Boyd (2006) as to what constitutes a tourist attraction.

DMO website inclusion

The websites of local tourism agencies were scrutinised to discern whether the stadia or clubs featured as part of the tourism offer, or warranted some mention that might be of interest to visitors. In nine cases, the stadium and/or club were mentioned. Only the website of Amsterdam's DMO (Iamsterdam.com) mentions the stadium, tour and museum as a visitor attraction. Interestingly, it also provides an external link to the reservation portal of the tour and museum website itself. Other websites such as that of Rotterdam (Rotterdam.info)

briefly mention the stadia of Feyenoord and Sparta Rotterdam, commenting on the historic nature of Sparta's stadium, but it fails to provide any compelling rationale for visiting either.

Discussion

The clubs of the Dutch *Eredivisie* clearly have ambitions for their stadia to be more than simply venues hosting football matches. There is an obvious dichotomy in The Netherlands based on the size and prestige of football clubs. AFC Ajax occupies one end of the scale, with SC Cambuur finding itself very much at the other extreme. For its part, Ajax could be considered one of Europe's elite clubs, an almost perennial participant in the UEFA Champions League, whereas Leeuwarden's SC Cambuur has oscillated between the *Eredivisie* and the second tier of competition (*eerste divisie*, "first division") over the past number of years. In terms of their respective stadia, the inference can be made that sustained on-field success is equated with more modern stadia featuring an expansive range of options. It is also noteworthy to mention that such stadia are invariably located in the larger population centres.

All stadia are seen to offer hospitality services that transcend the expected matchday variety in the form of snack kiosks or drink stands. Even the smallest, Excelsior's *Stadion Woudestein*, features a themed brasserie restaurant and meeting space. The findings indicate that the offerings overlapping into the areas of tourism, leisure and hospitality cater to a number of distinct audiences, but that practically all base their principal attraction on the link to football and the respective clubs. Edensor et al. (2021) consider that the football stadium and its facilities consist of four dimensions that also reveal themselves in this study. These include the provision of museums, a pilgrimage aspect that is apparent in stadium tours, plus the more obvious meeting spaces and dining facilities. The investigation into the online platforms of the teams themselves suggests that the information they provide relating to such aspects is very much aimed at different target markets. The major driving force behind practically all of these activities is unquestionably to optimise returns on investment and to provide additional sustainable revenue streams.

While they share many characteristics, these target audiences are discussed based on the information gathered, with the suggestion being that the clubs consider them in relation to their economic attractiveness. Surprisingly, the most visible "customer", the match-going fan, appears less important when it comes to clubs maximising a return on stadium facilities.

The corporate sector

The corporate sector figures prominently as the single most important segment to whom stadium facilities are marketed. From team-building exercises to incentives, conventions or business meetings, the appeal of this sector is felt across the four dimensions proposed by Edensor et al. (2021). Business customers represent an audience whose purchasing power enables them to consume and experience a wider range of offerings. This is mirrored across all the major professional football leagues in Europe (Ginesta, 2017). It also acts as the backdrop for much of the non-matchday activity conducted around football stadia, when facilities could potentially lie dormant and underexploited. It was interesting to observe that practically all Dutch clubs, irrespective of scale, actively seek out the business community as a major target audience. Many have developed specific departments to liaise with the business community, offering premium services that coincide with the hosting of football matches and promoting the various facilities for business meetings or events. In a highly competitive environment, football clubs also actively seek out partnerships and sponsorship deals with companies that provide a valuable additional source of revenue (Biscaia et al., 2014). This is borne out across the Dutch football landscape. Every club is linked to a multitude of business partners whose influence and financial input varies in amplitude from stadium naming rights to shirt sponsorship deals and other less visible manifestations. The study clearly illustrates this in noting that leisure and hospitality facilities in stadia are often used to cultivate and promote such relationships.

The leisure sector

Representing a diverse range of consumers, this sector, in the forms of groups or individuals, also emerges from the information gathered as a significant audience that clubs seek out to maximise the use of stadium facilities. It becomes apparent from the data that the multifunctional nature of the various meeting spaces, lounges, skyboxes and restaurants has broad appeal as suggested in 1999 by Westerbeek and Shilbury. From black-tie gala events, to weddings, children's parties and even arranging funeral services (at FC Twente), some clubs show a dexterity for marketing and promotion that would not appear out of place for a visitors and convention bureau. The attractiveness of this segment is undoubtedly in its heterogeneity. Much of this audience would not even figure in the sports fan typology developed by Hunt et al. (1999). This speaks also to the potential of stadium facilities where sporting connotations might be of limited significance for large portions of its audience. Indeed, the fact that many of the stadia host large music concerts is testament to this.

Heritage customers

The proliferation of museums and stadium tours linked to professional football marks a point where the sport crosses over into the domain of cultural heritage and tourism (Ramshaw &

Gammon, 2017). This is a well-documented phenomenon (Wood, 2005; Van Rheenen et al., 2016; Wright, 2019) and is reflected in the data gathered for this study concerning The Netherlands. These venues may figure as incidental attractions for the corporate guests or other event attendees, but are essentially promoted to the football fan with an interest in history, culture and the nostalgia surrounding the sport. As suggested by Edensor et al. (2021), stadium museums and tours are often characterised by connotations of liminality that border on the spiritual. The offerings in Dutch stadia corroborate this and appear very much focused on the fan experience, although some locations, such as Sparta Rotterdam's *Het Kasteel*, have wider historical significance and thus may have a broader appeal in terms of their cultural importance. Given the differing scale of the clubs in question, the prominence of these attractions is also varied. While the Johan Cruyff Arena has a whole department dedicated to promoting sporting heritage, it is not universal across the wider landscape, suggesting that operating a stadium museum and tour is perhaps not the most lucrative activity that clubs engage in.

Fans

Sports fans come in many guises as indicated in the typology developed by Hunt et al. (1999). Ginesta (2017) suggests that clubs target fans whose allegiance is often unwavering with opportunities to consume the brand anytime and anywhere. In fact, the author contends that some clubs have effectively transformed themselves into "entertainment multinationals". At the extremes, the loyal fan or customer identifies so closely with the team that they are co-opted as de facto brand ambassadors and are targeted, not just on matchday with hospitality, leisure or merchandising options, but at other moments, often via in-house TV channels, to consume and promote the whole range of products available (Proctor, 2022). These circumstances are prevalent in The Netherlands, but despite huge attendance on matchdays (Ajax frequently fills its 55 000 capacity stadium), this remarkably compliant market segment is evidently not large enough to provide either the return on investment sought, nor does it constitute a sufficiently interesting revenue stream from the perspective of exploiting stadium facilities outside the matchday context.

The state of play and SC Cambuur

As a focus of future research based on this initial study, it is important to note the situation of SC Cambuur as of 2023. The findings place the Leeuwarden team firmly in the lower tier of clubs whose activities overlap into the areas of hospitality, tourism and leisure. Despite this, and with facilities lagging well behind the likes of Ajax or others from larger cities, SC Cambuur has followed a tried-and-tested pathway that focuses very much on the business community in ensuring its facilities are exploited beyond the 90 minutes of the standard football match. The stadium, as it stands, lacks a stand-alone museum that is open to supporters and the public, while the provision of stadium tours is very much an ad hoc arrangement which speaks to the size of the club and the possible demand for such. Leeuwarden, with a population of approximately 120 000, is the regional capital of Friesland whose population density is one of the lowest in The Netherlands (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2022). The proposed move to a new stadium to the west of the city provides huge opportunities for the club in honing its offerings and ensuring

a return on its investment. It is hoped that this will propel SC Cambuur forward, both on and off the pitch. Interestingly, it is one of the few clubs who openly provides financial data relating to its hospitality and leisure operations and as such constitutes a valuable resource for this research going forward.

Conclusion

The encroachment of professional sports clubs into the space traditionally occupied by hospitality, tourism and leisure is a long-standing and evolving phenomenon that has only recently begun to attract the attention of the research community (Ginesta, 2011; 2017; Proctor et al., 2018; Edensor et al., 2021). The findings of this comparative study reflect the literature in illustrating the variety of the market offerings across one of Europe's relatively minor professional football leagues, the Dutch *Eredivisie*.

The study lays the foundations for observing the evolution of a relatively peripheral football club, SC Cambuur in Leeuwarden. It captures a moment in time that inventories the club's position within its competitive set. Its present operations linked to the domain of leisure are modest when compared to others, but it appears to have effectively exploited what is essentially a limited resource, the Cambuur stadium. The constraints of the venue are apparent. It is a dated facility located in a residential neighbourhood with all the inherent restrictions that this brings. In relocating to a modern state-of-the-art stadium, the club has the potential to greatly enhance its operations in a commercial sense. Despite a clear opportunity for attracting the wealthy corporate sector, it is hoped that the new stadium and its facilities will also become a community resource. The club has already suggested that this will indeed be the case.

Unfortunately, due to litigation during the construction process, the relocation has now been delayed to coincide with the start of the 2024/25 season (De Jong, 2023). In a further unfortunate twist of fate, SC Cambuur has again been relegated to the second tier of Dutch football following an abysmal 2022/23 season in the *Eredivisie*, finishing second from bottom. From the club's perspective, these are clearly challenging times and it has been suggested that the lack of financial resources when compared to others has contributed to the current on-field failures. The proposed relocation should address this to some extent and will also be a prominent focus for research going forward. Time might be kind to the Leeuwarden club in permitting it to clearly assess its future and how best to exploit the opportunities afforded by its new stadium. The current board might note the versatility of its competitors, both large and small, in how they showcase their facilities, which could provide a model for SC Cambuur to emulate. It might also look to local tourism agencies to promote the new venue and the city's principal professional sports club as representing an authentic side to Leeuwarden and one worthy of visitation. This study's findings show that this is presently not the case in Leeuwarden and that football clubs generally are beyond the gaze of tourism agencies.

Future research will involve expanding content analysis to cover additional sources of information such as social media posts, promotional material produced by SC Cambuur for its venue and interviews with stakeholders, including the club's management. It is also proposed to benchmark important findings with football clubs sharing similar characteristics in other European leagues. It is hoped that this will result in a framework of best practice.

As a benchmarking exercise for future research, this study does not make recommendations per se. It is also limited in scope to a particular dataset in The Netherlands and its findings would not be generalisable at this juncture, although future research could seek to address this.

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