

**A conceptual framework for understanding the relationship between a team and sport consumers**

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The spectator sport segment has been enjoying tremendous success for the last 30 years (Higgs & McKinley, 2005). To survive in the current sport business climate, sport organizations must determine how to effectively manage challenges such as spiraling costs, a highly competitive market place, increasing fan discontent and disconnection, and the explosive growth of new technology (Gladden & Sutton, 2009). In an effort to meet the challenges in the sport marketplace, researchers have advocated a fundamental shift in sport marketing from a traditional exchange paradigm to a relationship paradigm (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2007). Several reasons may be cited which help us understand the shift to a relationship paradigm. First, under a saturated and highly competitive market place, sport marketers need to redirect their primary focus from acquisition of new customers to maintenance of existing customers. Creating a new customer is much more difficult and expensive than retaining a current customer (Riechel & Sasser, 1990). Second, sport teams can take advantage of relationship marketing to repair damaged relationships with disgruntled fans (consumers). Third, emergence of new technology encourages sport marketers to adopt relationship marketing.

Relationship marketing has grown tremendously both in practice and academia. The growth is due to the general belief that relationship marketing efforts can build stronger customer relationships that lead to improvement in seller performance outcomes such as sales, market share, and profits (Crosby et al., 1990; Morgan & Hunt, 1984). The amount of the research on relationship marketing is continuously increasing in various areas of study, and demand for implementing relationship marketing is rapidly growing in sport marketing practice (Harris & Ogbonna, 2008; Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2007). There is a limited amount of research, however, which has investigated relationship marketing in the sport industry. There specifically seems to be a compelling need to better understand relationship quality. Relationship quality can be defined as an "overall assessment of the strength of a relationship, conceptualized as a composite or multidimensional construct capturing the different but related facets of a relationship" (Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006, p138). The importance of relationship quality is enumerated through the following reasons. First, relationship quality offers a platform to organize wide-ranging constructs considered to be essential aspects of relationships (Fournier, 1998). Second, relationship quality can provide insight into ways of distinguishing successful and unsuccessful relationships (Smit, Bronner, & Tolboom, 2007). Third, knowledge of relationship quality helps identify what kinds of problems exist in relationships and determine how those problems should be addressed (Roberts, Varki, & Brodie, 2003).

An important next step is to study the construct in relation to specific settings. There is essentially no research examining relationship quality from a sport consumer behavior perspective. The purpose of this research is to fill a gap in the relationship quality literature by developing a conceptual framework to advance our understanding of the role of relationship quality in the consumption behaviors. The research focuses on the following pivotal questions: (1) What relational constructs best represent the quality of the relationship between a sports team and consumers? (2) How are the relational constructs structured and cognitively evaluated? (3) What expected behavioral outcomes are associated with sport consumer relationship quality? (4) In what circumstances are different effects of relationship quality on sport consumption behaviors likely to occur?

Our conceptual framework consists of the three main components. First, the conceptual model specifies that relationship quality consists of the five distinct but related relational constructs such as trust, commitment, intimacy, self-connection, and reciprocity, which collectively represent the overarching concept of relationship quality. This multi-faceted relationship quality conceptualization departs from traditional approaches in explaining the bond formed between team and sport consumers. Researchers in sport management typically depend on a single construct to study the sport consumers' psychological connection to the team. However, the present study suggests that no single construct can fully capture the crux of team-sport consumer relationship (Harris & Ogbonna, 2008) and the essence of the relationship can be more clearly delineated with the five related but still distinct constructs included in our conceptual model. Sport management literature has heavily emphasized commitment and identification over other essential aspects of team-sport consumer relationship such as trust, intimacy, and reciprocity. Trust, intimacy, and reciprocity are regarded to be conceptually distinct from commitment and team identification and equally vital to clarify the bond between team and sport consumers in our model. Second, the proposed model indicates that the five relationship quality constructs are hierarchically linked to a global or higher-order construct of relationship quality. That is, the five individual constructs capture different facets of relationship quality but they also operate as indicators of the more complex and abstract concept of relationship quality. Third, the conceptual model postulates that word of mouth, media consumption, merchandise consumption, and attendance are influenced by relationship quality. This fundamental premise is well supported

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from the theoretical and empirical side (Couvelaere, & Richelieu, 2005). In addition, the relationship quality can be seen as a mediator of the relationship between sport organization's relationship marketing and the sport consumption behaviors. In fact, the previous research typically conceptualizes the effect of relationship marketing on actual consumptions to be fully mediated through one or more relationship quality constructs (Palmatier et al., 2006). Finally, the model assumes that product category, relationship personality, and demographics are the potential factors moderating the influence of relationship quality on the behavioral outcomes. Incorporation of moderators enables our conceptual framework to be applied across varying contexts in which the significance of the relationship for the individual might be shaped variously and relationship strategy might have varying results. First, synthesis of the various concepts in the literature on the relational constructs into a single relationship quality framework should assist scholars and sport marketers to better understand nature of the relationship phenomenon in sport consumption behavior context. Second, this study suggests the value of establishing good relationships with sport consumers, which is a crucial factor in managerial decision making, and therefore justifies the considerable effort to build and maintain strong consumer relationships. Third, this study extends the sport management literature by applying relationship marketing theories to the sport consumer behavior realm. Both relationship marketing and sport management research can benefit from the validation of the current knowledge about relationship marketing within sport consumption contexts and the integration of new research findings from this study.