The Influence of Relationship Quality on Sport Consumption Behaviors: An Empirical Examination of the Relationship Quality

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Relationship marketing (RM) can be defined as “all marketing activities directed towards establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges” (Morgan & Hunt, 1994, p. 22). In recent years, both researchers and practitioners have increasingly emphasized the importance of RM in sport organizations (Harris & Ogbonna, 2008). The reason for the increased focus on RM is that researchers and sport marketers generally believe that RM efforts can enhance relationships with sport consumers. These enhanced customer relationships can eventually result in increased team performance outcomes, such as ticket sales, sport media consumption and licensed merchandise sales (Gladden & Sutton, 2009).

Relationship quality (RQ) 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” (Palatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006, p138). The importance of RQ in RM has been well supported (Smit, Bronner, & Tolboom, 2007). However, very little attention has been paid to the issues of RQ in sport consumer behavior contexts. The fundamental characteristics of relationships substantially differ across types of consumers and products (Fournier, 1998). Thus, it will be advantageous to more fully understand the unique nature of RQ between a sport consumer and a team. Kim and Trail (2009) developed a conceptual framework theoretically determining the essential constructs of sport consumer-team RQ (trust, commitment, intimacy, self-connection, and reciprocity) and identifying expected outcomes of sport consumer-team RQ (attendance, media consumption, and merchandise consumption). Empirical testing of conceptual models and theoretical propositions are vital steps in the scientific inquiry process of a research phenomenon (Babbie, 2007). Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to empirically test a conceptual model of sport consumer-team RQ based on Kim and Trail’s proposal to build a better RQ knowledge-base in a sport consumer behavior context. Specifically, the objectives of this study were to: (a) investigate the cognitive structure of the sport consumer-team RQ constructs by conceptually and empirically comparing a general-specific model of RQ to a hierarchical model and (b) empirically examine the link between RQ and sport consumer behavioral intentions, including attendance, sport media consumption and licensed merchandise product consumption.

The study was conducted in the context of collegiate sports and the target population for the study was individuals who were affiliated with a southeastern university. Face-to-face and online survey modes were employed to collect the data. A total of 682 individuals participated in the study. Measures for Trust (3 items), Commitment (3 items), Self-Connection (3 items), Intimacy (3 items) and Reciprocity (3 items) from Sport Consumer-Team Relationship Quality scale (Kim, Trail, Woo, & Zhang, 2009) were used. To measure attendance intentions, two items were taken from Trail, Anderson, and Fink. (2005) and one item from Kwon, Trail, and James (2007). Two items from Fink, Trail, and Anderson (2002) and one item from Trail et al. (2005) were used to measure sport media consumption intentions. Three items from Lee (2008) were modified to measure licensed merchandise consumption intentions.

A CFA was performed using the Mplus 5.2 (Muthén & Muthén, 2008) and the model fit the data very well (S-B χ2/df = 465.411/224 = 2.077, RMSEA = .041, CFI = .980, SRMR = .033). The measurement scales showed adequate psychometric properties as indicated by all significant factor loadings in the predicted direction (p < .05), AVE values ranging from .62 for Reciprocity to .91 for Attendance and reliability coefficients ranging from .83 for Reciprocity to .97 for Attendance. In addition, correlations for all pairs of latent factors were significantly different from 1.0, rendering support for discriminant validity. To evaluate cognitive structure of the sport consumer-team RQ constructs, the general-specific model that specified one general factor of RQ and the five domain specific factors (trust, commitment, intimacy, self-connection, and reciprocity) and a second-order factor model that hypothesized a second-order construct composed of multiple first-order RQ constructs were compared. The general-specific model yielded good fit for the data (S-B χ2/df = 273.255/75 = 3.643, RMSEA = .065, CFI = .970, SRMR = .046). The second-order hierarchical model indicated adequate fit (S-B χ2/df = 396.851/85 = 4.669, RMSEA = .076, CFI = .953, SRMR = .032).
The results provide empirical support for individual constructs reflecting both the distinct aspect of specific dimensions of RQ and the holistic nature of RQ (Lages, Lages, & Lages, 2005). Thus, sport consumers may make judgments about RQ with a team depending on the evaluation of domain specific RQ factors in conjunction with a general or common RQ construct. The proposed general-specific model in this study presents a theoretically and empirically sound conceptualization of RQ in the context of spectator sport. Moreover, the result supports our proposition that sport consumers who perceive a higher level of RQ with the team would have a greater intention to attend games, consume sport media, and purchase merchandise products. This study contributes to the cumulative knowledge in the sport management and RM. First, this study enriches sport management literature by adding an application of a RM theory (relationship quality) and empirical validation to the research on sport consumer behavior. Second, this study augments the RM literature by validating unique characteristics of sport consumer-team RQ while reaffirming the beneficial effects of RQ on consumption within a sport consumer behavior context. From a practical standpoint, by identifying the key relational constructs, the framework provides a roadmap for sport marketers to prioritize the focal points of RM. Moreover, this study empirically supports the widely-held assumption in practice that a good relationship with sport consumers is a critical factor for a successful sport business, which justifies considerable effort and investment to build and maintain strong consumer relationships. Future research can improve the generalizability of the findings by using broader and wider sampling frames. In addition, a longitudinal study can provide stronger evidence for the predictive capability of RQ regarding actual sport consumption behaviors.