

**Exploring Longitudinal Consumer Movement in Professional Team Fandom: An Assessment and Comparison of Self-Reported and Empirical Measures**

*Adam Karg, Deakin University*  
*Heath McDonald, Swinburne University*

**Marketing**

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The importance of building and retaining consumer bases has led to an increasing focus on relationship marketing and fan development strategies by professional leagues and teams. Central to this is the creation of specific departments or functional units and strategic planning initiatives to guide and measure fan development operations. However, an ongoing challenge remains understanding the effectiveness of actions and developing measurement to support strategy and track development of consumers, particularly over the short term. Given these challenges, the aim of this research is to apply psychological and behavioral measures longitudinally to track change in individual's fandom or support over the course of a season. Where change has occurred, the study seeks to explore some of the rationale fans provide for increasing and decreasing their relationship with a sports team.

Multiple measures and frameworks have been posited to explain or describe the involvement or commitment consumers have with a sport team or organization. Some of these have been represented as segmentation frameworks, such as the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) (Funk & James, 2004) or Psychological Commitment to Team (PCT) (Mahoney, Madrigal & Howard., 1999). Other single or multiple construct measures focused on team identification (Wann & Branscombe, 1996; 1999), points of attachment (Trail, Robertson, Dick & Gillentine, 2003), attitudinal and behavioural loyalty (Bauer, Stikengurger-Sauer & Exler, 2008), strength of motivation to attend (Funk & Brunn, 2007) and organizational identity (Dietz-Uhler & Murrell, 1999) have also sought to explain various aspects of individual relationships with a team.

Where applied, such measures have been used to compare groups, to test hypotheses or as a means for segmentation. However, the majority of studies utilizing frameworks, constructs or items have been limited to a single data collection. As such, we know little about how effectively these measures reflect changes in individual's fandom or if the measures used in empirical studies correlate with individual's self-observed changes or behaviours. To extend understanding of consumer measurement within longitudinal fan development strategies, this study focus on professional sport teams and tracks changes in season ticket holders (STH) psychological, behavioral and self-reported measures.

Longitudinal data was collected from STH of three professional sport teams over two consecutive seasons. Each of the teams compete in the same high profile professional football league in Australia, with data collected using an online survey distributed to all STH at the conclusion of each season. The items collected were identical over the two collection periods. Given it was not possible to include all past measures classifying an individual's relationship with a team, the study focused on a combination of attitudinal and behavioral measures to give a wide range of outcome measures on which to assess and explore change. These included nine items to measure the PCM, a single item fan rating scale, as well as single item measures of satisfaction with the season ticket product, value for money perceptions and a likelihood to renew measure. Actual behaviours including live attendance and media viewing of team games were also collected. To collect STH self-reported change, a question was included in the second year of the data collection that asked: Over the current season, did your level of support or fandom with the team increase, stay the same or decrease? If the respondent reported a change, they were asked two follow up open response questions about what had changed about the level of support, and why they perceived this change had taken place.

Across the three teams 10,228 and 8,690 STH responded to the survey at the end of seasons 1 and 2 respectively (response rates across the data collections were between 18% and 28%). All individuals from the year 2 sample were matched with their responses in year 1 using unique identifiers in the dataset, representing 2,996 longitudinal cases for analysis. Based on the self-reported measure of seasonal change, 10.4% (n=310) indicated they increased their level of support, while 14.4% (n=432) indicated they had decreased their level of support over the season. Those STHs who indicated increased support were more likely to be newer STH and also had higher satisfaction and

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attendance levels in the initial season of investigation. We then compared increasing support, decreasing support and groups indicating no change on attitudinal and behavioral measures. Logically, we found that satisfaction with the STH product, value for money perceptions and live games attended significantly increased for those whose support for team had risen over the season.

At group level analysis we saw significant changes correlated with increasing or declining levels of support in the majority of individual items for the PCM. We then compared changes of each individual longitudinal case. When considering STH who said they had increased or decreased support for the team, we saw 33% had moved a stage of the PCM in the direction of this self-observed change, with 55% remaining at the same stage (12% moved a stage in the opposite direction to what was expected). STH who observed a change in self-observed fandom correlated with change on the seven-point single item rating 28% of the time, with 54% staying at the same level (18% moved in the opposite direction to what was expected). Overall, reasons for increasing support fell under five categories; social networks or interaction, higher attendance, access to communications and media, on field performance or upgrading or enhancing their season ticket. Reasons for decreasing support fell under three categories; on-field performance, decreased attendance given membership downgrade or changed personal circumstances, and frustration with team administration or management.

The findings firstly provide indicators of what actions and behaviours generate higher or lower levels of support, hence providing guidance for teams to increase commitment and prevent disengagement. The relationships seen between satisfaction, loyalty and attendance suggest these measures are both antecedents to levels of engagement, as well as indicators that can be used to consider or predict likely future movement in fan level. That self-reported change largely corresponded with significant changes in PCM items and stage movement is encouraging and suggests empirical tools can add value in segmentation and to help guide fan development strategies of teams.