Beyond Behavioral Intentions: A Longitudinal Analysis of the Antecedents of Behavioral Loyalty in Spectator Sport

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Marketing Thursday, May 29, 2014 20-minute oral presentation (including questions) (Conference Center C)

Abstract 2014-005 8:30 AM

Understanding the process behind repeat purchases and what is driving this phenomenon has played a central role in academic research in sport marketing over the last few decades (Heere, Walker, Yoshida, Ko, Jordan, & James, 2011; Laverie & Arnett, 2000; Matsuoka, Chelladurai, & Harada, 2003; Trail, Anderson, & Fink, 2005). Most of the work on this topic is cross-sectional in nature, forcing researchers to focus on the concept of “behavioral intentions” to measure consumers’ willingness to repurchase products (e.g., Matsuoka et al., 2003; Trail et al., 2005). It still remains unclear how attitudinal constructs influence behavioral loyalty over time. Specifically, because of the lack of a longitudinal assessment of brand loyalty toward a sport team, sport marketing researchers have not been able to assess what attitudinal processes actually predict future behavior over time. Given the limitations of previous research, the purpose of this study was to examine the effects of team identification, points of attachment (i.e., fan community, sport, player and local city), satisfaction (satisfaction with game and service), and behavioral intentions on repeat purchasing behavior, using a longitudinal approach.

In order to test the proposed relationships, we worked with a professional soccer club based in a large-sized city in west Japan. The soccer club belonged to the Japan professional football league’s (J. League) Division II. This study was conducted throughout the 2012 season. The club has a fan loyalty program that tracks consumers’ attendance frequency. The subjects of this study were members of the loyalty program. At the soccer club’s fifth home game held in April 2012, we distributed survey questionnaires to spectators in the stands at the stadium before the game started. The objective of the survey was to collect consumers’ self-reported data on team identification, attachment points, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions. From the 600 questionnaires distributed, 596 were returned for a response rate of 99.3%.

After the 2012 season was over, the soccer club provided attendance records for 9727 loyalty program members. We matched the survey data to the loyalty program data according to each participant’s loyalty program identification number. Through this procedure, we gathered data on 237 subjects. We further eliminated four respondents who had never attended the club’s home game prior to the first data collection because these participants were not able to respond to the survey items of consumer satisfaction that required consumers’ cumulative experiences at previous games. This left a total of 233 usable cases (n = 233). Of the total sample, 69.5% of the respondents were male. Age was measured in years and transformed into a categorical variable. Approximately, one-third of the subjects were in the 40-49 age range (31.9%), 27.6% were 50 years old and above, 25.0% were between 30 and 39 years old, and 15.5% were between 18 and 29 years old. With respect to the length of time in the fan club, 10.1% were new members who joined the program in the year studied, while 27.6% were between 2 and 4 years, 40.3% were between 5 and 9 years, and 21.8% were more than 10 years.

We operationalized attendance frequency using fan loyalty card data. Consistent with Bolton, Kanna, and Bramlett (2000) and Seiders, Voss, Grewal, and Godfrey (2005), we aggregated the number of games attended over a particular period. In our case, we measured attendance frequency by summing the number of home games attended for each individual consumer over the first-half (four months) and the second-half (four months) of the season. In order to measure team identification (Trail & James, 2001), attachment points (Keller, 2003; Mahony et al., 2002; Trail Robinson, Dick, & Gillentine, 2003), satisfaction with game and service experiences (Yoshida & James, 2010), and behavioral intentions (Yoshida & James, 2010), we adapted the items used to measure the constructs from previous research.

The psychometric properties of the items were assessed through a confirmatory factor analysis using LISREL 8.8. The fit indices indicate the measurement model is an acceptable fit to the data (chi-square = 556.92, df = 224; CFI = .95; NNFI = .93; RMSEA = .080). Follow-up analyses based on the recommendations of Fornell and Larcker (1981)
and Anderson and Gerbing (1988) provided support for the convergent and discriminant validity of the measurement models. Based on the results of the structural model testing, team identification predicted attendance frequency only in the first-half of the season (beta = .17, p < .05). The findings further indicate that fan community attachment has positive direct effects on attendance frequency in both the first-half (beta = .27, p < .01) and the second-half of the season (beta = .33, p < .01). On the other hand, game satisfaction, service satisfaction, and behavioral intentions were not significant predictors of attendance frequency throughout the season. The R2 values for attendance frequency in the first-half and the second-half of the season were .20 and .15, respectively.

By implementing a longitudinal approach to accurately capture a behavioral indicator of loyalty, we encountered surprising results that deviate from some of the existing consumer behavior theories in sport marketing. On the one hand, we found that fan community attachment, a construct that only recently has begun to attract the attention of scholars in sport marketing (Heere & Katz, 2013), was a very strong predictor of attendance frequency in the first-half and the second-half of the season, while traditional consumer behavior constructs such as team identification, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions did not significantly predict consumer behavior over a longer period of time. Oliver (1999) notes that if a company’s products involve a great deal of social interactions between the consumers, an additional loyalty dimension stems from the social bonding of the consumption community. This type of loyalty is referred to as communal-brand connection (Rindfleisch, Burroughs, & Wong, 2009) which is characterized by a deep bond of friendship and camaraderie among the users of a brand (Keller, 2003; Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001). Given the theoretical importance of communal-brand connection, it seems reasonable to believe that a consumer’s attachment to a fan community is a significant driver of direct attendance at sporting events over time. Some of the most successful sport team brands in the world (e.g., Liverpool F.C., Chicago Cubs, Ohio State Buckeyes) have developed a very loyal fan base, not only because of their successes on the field, but also because of their fans who developed a community in which the markers of brand community, such as traditions, rituals and history, are well presented and assist in the interaction between fans.