Guided by relationship theory (Fournier, 1998), the purpose of this study was to develop and validate a scale to measure sport team eFANgelism (TM). Relationship theory was introduced by Fournier in 1998 to explain the roles brands play in the life of a consumer. Relationship theory conceptualizes the brand as a behavioral entity and an active partner within a consumer’s many relationships (Fournier, 1998). The theory has been applied to several different groups and contexts but has yet to be applied to sport. Relationship theory was targeted as a guiding framework for the current study for many reasons. Most notably, its firm behavioral foundation stemming from passionate and emotional connections to brands provides a natural fit for explaining the relationship between a sport fan and his/her favorite team.

Sport team loyalty, in its many forms, has most often been conceptualized as a multi-dimensional phenomenon. Within the several iterations of the construct’s growth, extension, application, and refinement, two dimensions, attitudinal and behavioral, have been most commonly identified as integral components. Attitudinal loyalty and psychological commitment, in particular, have received a great deal of attention from researchers. Meanwhile, the behavioral component going back to the work of Day (1969) and Jacoby and Chestnut (1978) has been best measured simply as the frequency of repeat patronage. While this form of measurement may work with general product and services with more straightforward supply and demand relationships, the extension to sport may require further refinement. While frequency of live attendance, media usage, and merchandise purchases may remain viable forms of measurement of behavioral loyalty, substantial flaws associated with these metrics include supply-side issues (ticket availability) and geographic limitations. Thus, the current authors wondered if these components are the best measures of behavioral loyalty of sport fans. In other words, is behavioral loyalty a multi-dimensional construct similar to its more popular antecedent, attitudinal loyalty?

One form of behavioral loyalty of particular interest was the phenomenon of sport team (brand) evangelism. Brand evangelism was defined by Matzler, Pichler, and Hemetsberger (2007) as “spreading positive opinions and trying fervently to convince or persuade others to get engaged with the same brand” (p. 27). While word of mouth related behaviors were first identified by Dick and Basu (1994) as a consequence of consumer loyalty, given the heightened attachment and identification associated with team fandom (Wann & Branscombe, 1991), it is logical to assume communication is more passionate and emotional, extending beyond positive word of mouth activities to intense persuasive communication between fans and non-fans. Numerous benefits come to brands with evangelistic consumers, as these individuals are promoting the brand on a daily basis. Furthermore, brand evangelists provide a level of credibility as they are not a member of the organization they are praising which can lead to the building of strong brand communities (Matzler et al., 2007).

Following Churchill’s (1979) suggestion for developing effective marketing constructs, the current study implemented his five-step procedure for developing and validating a sport team eFANgelism instrument. First, a review of behavior loyalty, brand evangelism, and brand relationship theory literature was conducted to specify the domain for the current study. Second, a semi-structured interview guide was composed, and two, six person focus groups were facilitated to begin the item generation process. Based on the open-ended responses of focus group participants, the data were transcribed, coded, and refined by three independent investigators.

Third, additional data collection followed as the survey was sent to a sample of undergraduate and graduate students at a large urban institution in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. This study is on-going and is currently in the data collection stage. Once completed, a principal component analysis (PCA) with promax rotation will be conducted. Fourth, factor loadings, eigenvalues, and item correlations will be interpreted as a means of measure
puraification. In addition, the results of the PCA will be analyzed by three independent sport consumer behavior experts to ensure factors and items accurately measure the specified domain.

For the fifth and final step of Churchill’s (1979) procedure, the revised survey will be sent to a sample of Philadelphia area sports fans through a partnership with the Philadelphia Daily News. This step will include further measurement purification, but most importantly, will provide assessment of instrument reliability and validity. A confirmatory factor analysis will be performed in mPlus to verify the underlying factor structure. Reliability (Cronbach’s α and interitem correlations), convergent validity (Average Variance Extracted [AVE]), discriminant validity (AVE test), and criterion-related (predictive) validity will then be tested.

As mentioned above, the current study is on-going. The results of the focus groups were positive. Each session lasted approximately one hour. Participants were a mix of avid and moderate fans of a range of sport teams including intercollegiate, professional, and international sport organizations. Participants ranged in age from 22-58, 75% were Caucasian, and 25% were female. Following transcription and coding, 88 distinct statements were identified as possible items for the scale. Three rounds of item refinement followed as the statements were tested for content and face validity. Thirty-three statements were ultimately settled upon and converted into survey items on a five point Likert-type scale where one equaled never and five equaled always. Phase one of the survey data collection is scheduled to be completed by mid-November 2013 and the final sample of Philadelphia Sport Fans will be surveyed in January of 2014. The study will be completed by February 28th, 2014.

References


