Examining the Impacts of Relationship Quality on Consumers’ Psychological Connection with a Professional Sport Team

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The use of relationship marketing has gained widespread attention. The traditional ‘marketing to customers’ approach is now focused on ‘marketing with customers’ to co-create value in a service-dominant approach (Lusch, Vargo, & O’Brien, 2007). Based on Service-Dominant (S-D) logic, relationship quality plays a key role in linking the consumers’ perception of external service delivery to the service provider. Thus, the current study examines how sport management service delivery factors that an organization provides contribute to a stronger psychological connection between the sport organization and consumers.

The Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) outlines how an individual’s psychological connection toward a sport organization progressively develops (Funk & James, 2001; 2006). Within this framework, a wide range of personal, psychological, and environmental factors are proposed to influence attitude formation and change that underpins the relationship building process. However, the PCM has traditionally relied upon internal determinants (i.e., psychological and personal factors) with little attention devoted to examining how environmental determinants influence the psychological connection. Therefore, integrating a relationship quality perspective into the PCM framework is beneficial to understand how management actions and services the organization provides contribute to the strength of the connection.

Relationship quality can be conceptualized as representing the customer's perception and evaluation of a relationship with an organization for mutual benefits. The perceived value placed on the relationship and value congruity with a consumer's expectation acts at both organizational and individual levels (Huntley, 2006). In this regard, relational quality operates as an environmental determinant that influences the fulfillment of consumers’ needs (Hennig-Thurau & Klee, 1997) and this interaction enhances the co-creation of value based on trust and commitment which are two critical sub-dimensions of relationship quality. Also, specific antecedents of relationship quality related to membership services, perceived reciprocity in terms of mutual exchange relationships, effective communication as sharing timely information through various service channels, the club’s managerial performance and administration, and on-field performance can be key variables to drive relationship quality in a professional sport context. Sport fans’ reaction to those services and management activities determines trust and commitment associated with the level of relationship quality in developing a stronger psychological connection. Taken together, the following research hypotheses were derived.

HO1: Antecedents related to perceived membership service quality, reciprocity, communication with members, club administration, and on-field performance will have a positive effect on trust and commitment.
HO2: Trust and commitment will play a significant role in developing a customer's psychological connection with a sport team.

In order to test the proposed hypotheses, 5,171 on-line responses were collected via a questionnaire distributed to Richmond Football Club (RFC) members in the 2013 season. The RFC is a professional team that plays in the Australian Football League. The majority of the survey respondents were male (72.3%) between 41 and 55 years old (48.9%). Regarding the membership tenure groups, respondents who held for more than 11 years were 41.9%.

The following scales were used to measure the constructs of interest. The five antecedents of relationship quality were measured using a) service quality, b) reciprocity, c) communication, d) club administration and e) on-field performance (Liu et al., 2011; McDonald & Sherry, 2010; Pervan et al., 2009). Relationship quality was assessed using two sub-dimensions: trust with a five item scale (Huntley, 2006; Roberts et al., 2003) and commitment with a three
item scale (Walsh et al., 2010). Lastly, to measure psychological connection as the outcome of relationship quality, four items were used (Arnold & Reynold, 2003; Beaton, Funk, & Alexandris, 2009).

The Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was used for data analysis. First, tests of internal consistency reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity for the included constructs revealed the measurement model provided a good fit for the data. Second, bootstrapping techniques were used to test the significance of each hypothesized linkage. Results revealed the five antecedents accounted for 54% of variance in trust and 22% of variance in commitment. Combined, the five antecedents along with trust and commitment explained 55% of variance in the psychological connection. Furthermore, the effects of each path on relationship quality were as follows. Service quality was found to significantly influence trust ($\beta=.172, t=11.529, p<.001$). Reciprocity was a significant predictor for both trust and commitment associated with the level of relationship quality ($\beta=.467, t=37.569, p<.001; \beta=.411, t=27.812, p<.001$). Reciprocity among the proposed antecedents was a stronger predictor of both trust and commitment. The remaining paths were significant in small and moderate relationship strength, except for an insignificant link and negative path coefficient between club administration and commitment.

In summary, this research demonstrates the important role of reciprocity in contributing to consumer trust and commitment as well as creating a stronger psychological connection among club members of a professional sport organization. In addition, the empirical findings provide new insight into context-specific drivers of relationship quality related to membership services, communication effectiveness, club board’s relationship building efforts, and on-field performance as well as their potential role in building a stable meaningful relationship with the organization. In practice, managerial attention should focus on membership strategies and activities that are perceived as helping the member in regards to important relationships with family and friends as well as treating him/her as an equal partner. Overall, the importance of relationship quality should encourage sport organizations to engage in management actions and services for mutual benefits. Sport organizations can leverage this strategic approach in building a stronger and enduring consumer-organization connection.