Impact of Core and Peripheral Service Satisfaction and Team Identification on Spectator Sport Service Repurchase: A Comparison of Minor and Major League Sport Games

Yongjae Kim, Kutztown University
Elizabeth Rogol, Kutztown University

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By incorporating two different types of service satisfaction (core and peripheral service), this research models the interrelationship of consumer satisfaction and team identification within the antecedent relationship of repurchase intention in both major and minor league sport contexts. Services research has emphasized the importance of consumer retention for organizations’ long term success. Rising operational costs have organizations focusing on marketing strategies, such as customer retention, rather than the more costly strategy of attracting new customers (Buttle, 2007). Sport organizations at all levels have been challenged with finding new ways to increase customer retention.

Scholars have focused on customer satisfaction as a determinant of repurchase intention and customer retention. Customer satisfaction increases a firm’s profitability through developing customer retention (Hume, 2008). Research on core and peripheral service quality has confirmed that customer satisfaction has a direct and positive relationship with repurchase intention. However, Kim and Rogol (2014) noted that examining the effects of fans’ satisfaction without considering sport contexts would be problematic to explicate how customer satisfaction affects team identification and repurchase behaviors in different competition contexts. Accordingly, this study aims to expand the insights of the relative effects of core and peripheral service satisfaction on team identification to two different sport contexts (i.e., major and minor league ice hockey). Specifically, the purpose of this study is two-fold: 1) to develop and test a conceptual research model delineating the relationship between core and peripheral service satisfaction, team identification, and repurchase intention in professional spectator sport business contexts; and 2) examine if the research model shows the similar pattern of relationship across different sport contexts. Knowledge of the role of team identification in the relationship between consumer satisfaction and re-purchase intention is undeveloped in the sport service sector, positioning both academic and practical research as warranted. This paper aims to fill this gap.

The commonly-held convention of repurchase intentions and behaviors is that they are a function of customer satisfaction and loyalty (Bolton, 1998; Peter & Olson, 2009; Solomon, 2015). Research findings have supported this convention in the sport context (e.g., Matsuoka, Chelladurai & Harada, 2003). Sport is a complex service offering a hedonic experience which is primarily intangible (Addis & Holbrook, 2001; Lovelock, 2001). The experience of attending a sport event involves the mix of the core service, the game itself, and peripheral services external to the game (Hume, 2008; Thwaites, 1999). The game is produced and consumed simultaneously, therefore, the total fan experience includes the game itself and the facility and its atmosphere (Bitner, 1992). Researchers have determined spectators with higher levels of satisfaction with the sportscape are more willing to attend future games (Wakefield, Blodgett, & Sloan, 1996; Wakefield & Sloan, 1995).

For a fan with a strong psychological attachment to a team, team identification represents a particularly important social identity (Greenwood, 2006; Mael & Ashoforth, 1992; Madrigal & Chen, 2008). Fans with high levels of identification often interpret their team’s wins and losses as personal successes and failures (Hirt, Zillmann, Erickson, & Kennedy, 1991; Madrigal & Chen, 2008). Studies have found team identification to be associated with a variety of consumptive intentions and behaviors (Wakefield, 1995; Matsuoka et al., 2003). Although satisfaction with the game experience and team identification have been found to be positively related to intention to attend future games, team identification has been identified to have the greater impact on consumption behaviors (Gray & Wert-Gray, 2011; Matsuoka et al., 2013).

Based on literature review, the following hypotheses were developed:
H1: Core service satisfaction positively influences repurchase intention

H2: Peripheral service satisfaction positively influences repurchase intention

H3: Core service satisfaction positively influences team identification

H4: Peripheral service satisfaction positively influences team identification

H5: Team identification positively influences repurchase intention

H6: The same pattern of relationship exists between research constructs across different sport contexts (major and minor league sport games).

Using a convenience sampling technique, 918 of 1042 responses were deemed usable with 88.1% of response rate. Of the 471 spectators in the major ice hockey games, 74.3% (n = 350) were male and 65.4% (n = 308) were single. The age of respondents ranged from 18 to 78 years old with 42.1 years being the average age. The majority of the spectators in the minor league games were male (n = 234, 52.3%), married (n = 275, 61.7%), white (n = 391, 87.5%), with an average age of 43.1 (age ranged from 18 to 85 years old). The analyses included descriptive analysis, reliability test, validity test, and structural equation modeling.

The confirmatory factor analyses for each sport context revealed that the measurement model fits well with the sample data (S-B \( \chi^2/df = 77.26/30 = 2.56, \) CFI = .96, TLI = .95, SRMR = .04, RMSEA = .06 for the major league sport game; S-B \( \chi^2/df = 73.96/30 = 2.47, \) CFI = .98, TLI = .96, SRMR = .04, RMSEA = .06 for the minor league sport game). There is also strong evidence of reliability and validity in the measurement scale.

The structural equation modeling analyses were conducted to test the fit of the structural model that included the hypothesized relations among constructs. This model provided a good fit to the data, according to all criteria. The group invariant model results showed that the impact of performance and peripheral service-related satisfaction varies across sport contexts. The results provided empirical evidence of the direct effect of performance-related satisfaction on team identification leading to revisit intent in both major and minor league sport contexts, while peripheral service-related satisfaction had a direct effect on team identification in only the major league sport context. Direct effect of peripheral service-related satisfaction on revisit intent was evident in the minor league sport context but not in the major league sport context.

The findings of this study provide marketers with several meaningful implications. It is essential for sport teams to better position themselves across different sport contexts. In order to meet the needs and wants of both low and high identification fans, minor league sport teams need to focus on improving the core product, as well as, focus on entertainment, promotional activities, and facility quality to enhance satisfaction of low identification fans. These applications would lead to increased customer satisfaction, positively influencing repurchase intentions. The peripheral service has positive impacts both on identification at the major league level and repurchase intent at the minor league level. Given that sport fans' spectatorship is a direct function of team identification, the positive direct impact of peripheral service on team identification level emphasizes an importance of peripheral service at the major league level.