Whence, Sport Consumer Loyalty? Applying Oliver's (1999) Loyalty Framework to the Sport Context 20 Years Later

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Oliver (1999) advocated for the shift from satisfaction-driven marketing strategies to loyalty-based strategies as a basis for organizational success. He posited that loyalty operates sequentially through four distinct phases (cognitive, affective, conative, action) (Oliver, 1997). He further contended that envelopment within a consumption community and an immersed self-identity with a product are two strategies to foster loyalty among consumers (Oliver, 1999). The sport context is the ideal setting to test these propositions as they relate to fostering loyalty. Researchers have found that sport fans develop both vertical connections (team identification) and horizontal connections to other sport fans (fan community identification) (Katz & Heere, 2013; Yoshida, Gordon, Heere, & James, 2015). However, the relationship between these two types of connection and the dimensions of loyalty has not been examined previously. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to test the dimensionality of sport consumer loyalty as well as examine the relationship among team identification, fan community identification and the dimensions of loyalty.

The study included data collected from a sample of sport consumers (N = 474) residing in a mid-sized, Midwestern city. To better understand the dimensionality of sport consumer loyalty and the influence of fan community identification and team identification, a two-step approach was utilized to test the measurement and structural model components via MPlus 7.31 (Kline, 2005). The goal of the analysis was to assess the reliability and validity of the four dimensions of sport consumer loyalty and to test the relationship among the dimensions of loyalty, fan community identification and team identification.

The dimensionality of loyalty was examined via confirmatory factor analysis. Model fit indices including CFI (.94), TLI (.93), SRMR (.04), and RMSEA (.07) illustrated an acceptable fit of the model to the data. Convergent and discriminant validity was assessed with Fornell and Larcker’s (1981) average variance extracted (AVE) method and evidence of convergent and discriminant validity was established. Given the results, it provides support for the four-dimensional model of sport consumer loyalty. In regards to assessing the aforementioned relationships, it was found that team identification and fan community identification both had a positive and significant impact on affective loyalty ($\beta = .63; \beta = .67$) and action loyalty ($\beta = .47; \beta = .27$), but not with cognitive or conative loyalty.

The findings provided initial evidence of Oliver's (1999) loyalty framework applied to the sport context. It is important to understand that sport consumers may operate in different phases of the loyalty process. While some may have an attitudinal or emotional connection to the team, this may not translate into actual purchasing behavior or even the intention to purchase. Therefore, it is imperative to examine loyalty as a multi-dimensional construct and determine how marketing strategies can impact loyalty construction. Specifically, fostering the connection between the team and fan as well as the fan-to-fan connection can positively impact not only how strong they feel about the team but it can also impact their continue commitment to purchase team merchandise, attend games, and spread positive word of mouth.