

The relationships between customer loyalty, satisfaction and team identification. An investigation into French ice-hockey spectators

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Aim of paper and research questions

What are the roles played by customer satisfaction and team identification in the loyalty's formative process in the sport spectatorship context?

Literature review

In regard to the development of the relational marketing approach in the service industry in general and the sport service industry in particular, customer loyalty has received major attention from both researchers and practitioners, and the quest for its antecedents remains an ongoing purpose. Although sport services dealing with participation such as health and fitness clubs present numerous communalities with other services in terms of customer loyalty formative process, sport spectatorship seems to rely on a different process because of the special link between customer and consumption object (e.g., Funk et al., 2001; Holt, 1995). Indeed, although classical drivers for customer loyalty, such as customer satisfaction, might be relevant for casual spectators, the team identification concept seems to be a strong predictor of fan behaviours which might explain that even with long runs of defeats and then unsatisfying experiences of consumption, some fans stay loyal to their team (Wann, Melnick, Russell & Pease, 2001). Although numerous studies have investigated the relationships between customer satisfaction and loyalty and the outcomes of team identification in sport spectatorship services, few (e.g., Matsuoka, Chelladurai & Harada, 2003) have dealt simultaneously with the relationships between these two antecedents and customer loyalty. For this reason, this research aims to investigate several possible relationships between the concepts of customer satisfaction, customer attitudinal and behavioural loyalty and team identification in the context of sport spectatorship.

Research design and data analysis

A questionnaire comprised a measure of transaction-specific satisfaction, two measures of attitudinal loyalty, four measures of behavioural loyalty (length of spectatorship, number of home and away games attended per season, number of games watched on TV), one measure of team identification and several social-demographic characteristics. The French ice-hockey context was selected by the researchers because of its geographical proximity and because the ice-hockey federation strongly aims to increase its knowledge of ice-hockey spectator behaviours. An electronic version of the questionnaire was created and a web link was displayed on several French ice-hockey websites or sent to spectators' email addresses previously collected at a premier league game by several research assistants (see for a similar method Wakefield & Wann, 2006). Finally, 395 questionnaires were useful and spectators were predominantly male (66.6%), young ($M = 27.69$ years old, $SD = 10.01$), and mainly middle-

class (32.5%) which corresponded to the results obtained by Crawford (2001) for ice-hockey spectators in Great-Britain.

Results

Different models were tested using linear regression analysis because all the measures were either metric or psychometric. The results of the analysis identified transaction-specific (T-S) satisfaction and team identification as direct antecedents of customer attitudinal loyalty with a stronger influence played by T-S satisfaction. However, none of the behavioural loyalty variables were found to have a significant link with attitudinal loyalty. Team identification was also found to be a partial mediator of the relationship between T-S satisfaction and attitudinal loyalty. Team identification also seemed to play a moderating role between T-S satisfaction and the intention to attend other games in the future which was one of the component of attitudinal loyalty. Finally, team identification did not seem to play a mediating nor a moderating role on the relationship between behavioural and attitudinal loyalty.

Discussion and conclusion

The results of this research tend to highlight the importance of the elements of the lived sport spectatorship experience in the explanation of short-term behavioural intentions and tend to reduce the importance of team identification as an antecedent for those types of outcomes. Indeed, it was found that the most important driver for loyalty intentions was T-S satisfaction in comparison with team identification and behavioural loyalty. However, it was found that team identification can modulate the intensity of this relationship. Furthermore, no behavioural loyalty measures were significantly linked to team identification. In our empirical context, it means that regular game attendance and/or watching do not significantly enhance neither predict the level of team identification which consequently seems to be mainly generated or enhanced by psychological bonding, either cognitive or affective. The main limitations of this study is the fact that a convenience sample was used and that the study was conducted in one specific sport context in one specific country which reduces the potential generalisation of the results.

References

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