

“LOVE IS ALL YOU NEED”: THE MANIFESTATION OF LOVE OF SPORT

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Abstract

It is often thought that sports fans are the ultimate consumer, their unfailing loyalty, passion, commitment and love for their team is one which every brand, regardless of industry, aspires to. Whilst sport purports to be a unique industry in which its consumers can be considered ‘die hard’ or ‘fanatical fans’ (Smith & Stewart, 2010), the question begs, what are the ingredients required to create such committed loyal fans? The present research aims to investigate the role that love plays in sport team loyalty and what causes consumers to fall in love with a team.

The word ‘love’ invokes perceptions of romance and feelings of love for another person and can be extended to feelings about an object, activity or brand (Ahuvia, 2005; Whang, Allen, Sahoury & Zhang, 2004). In this current research, we invoke these perceptions of love but also extend them to sport and a sports team. It has been argued that there is ‘no universally accepted definition of love’ (Whang, Allen, Sahoury & Zhang, 2004, p. 320). Whang et al. (2004) state that love is the ‘outcome of bi-directional interaction between two partners’ and when the target of the affection is an object the interaction becomes unidirectional. Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) propose a more romantic definition of brand love ‘as the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied customer has for a particular brand’ (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006, p. 81). Until recently the concept of love was limited to the psychology literature where Sternberg (1997) presented his triangular love scale, including dimensions of passion, intimacy and commitment. The theory of love has received extensive attention in the psychology literature, however there is a gap beyond this in both marketing and more specifically the sport domain.

The love a sports fan has for their team is a potentially

powerful factor in explaining variations in fan loyalty. Were The Beatles right when they sang “love is all you need”? Is love the key ingredient in developing loyalty and allegiance in fans? Through a detailed review of the literature on love in the area of psychology and the emotional attachment of fans derived from the sport management field, this research aims to develop a greater understanding of what it means to love a sporting team. The research aims to explore the meaning of a love of sport and the manifestation of this love in the sporting context towards teams. What do fans mean when they say they love their team? How does this love develop? What inhibits or facilitates it, and how is love expressed?

This research adopts a qualitative research design, as it is exploratory in nature. The primary method of investigation is semi-structured in-depth interviews. Results from the interviews will be used to provide insight into what love towards a sporting team is, how this is developed and how this is expressed. The sample was selected to gain a representative selection of fans from casual fans to highly involved fans. The selection of cases was based on a number of criteria. The context of this study is Australian Rules Football, where a cross-section of fans of the league and the teams exist. The semi-structured interviews were typically of 60 minutes duration. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The interview protocol included open-ended questions structured around a number of subject areas. Data were collected, coded and analyzed concurrently for similarities, differences, general patterns and relationships. Through this analysis the key issues were identified and modeled.

This study seeks to address a gap in both the marketing and more specifically the sport marketing literature. If sport organizations seek to build a competitively resistant and committed fan base they must devote resources to establishing fans’ love of sport and towards teams. By exploring the topic across a spectrum of fans the study seeks to identify whether casual fans have the same love for a team as highly loyal fans and if the love is manifested in a similar or different manner. Through answering these questions greater insight can be provided to sport marketers into love as a driver of loyalty.

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