

Revisiting and theorizing customer engagement in sport

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Aim of abstract

Customer Engagement (CE) is often investigated and measured in services marketing literature (e.g. Hollebeek et al., 2014). Still, focus so far has mainly been on social media or on retailing contexts (Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014; Vivek, Beatty, Dalela, & Morgan, 2014). However, the context of sport is characterized by unique aspects (e.g. value co-creation, rivalry, uncertainty of outcome). Therefore, a simple adaptation of the CE construct does not provide a profound understanding of the sport customer. Moreover, the few studies analysing fan engagement lack capturing all CE dimensions (Yoshida, Gordon, Nakazawa, & Biscaia, 2014), calling for further investigation of CE in sports. This study reviews different CE literature and related concepts from other literature streams to develop a conceptual framework. The framework demonstrates how CE should be adapted and categorized to gain a better understanding of customers in the sport event context. By doing so, we contribute to theorizing customer behaviour in sport marketing.

Review of literature

While academic literature lacks a consistent definition of CE, there is broad consensus that CE goes beyond purchase and takes in different levels of customer's interactions with a brand or firm's offering or activities (Vivek et al., 2014). Scholars consider CE as the new key metric for organizational performance (Hollebeek et al., 2014). Although researchers' attention has recently been on CE and its measurement, previous, closely related constructs such as customer participation (CP), customer citizenship (CCB) and customer voluntary performance (CVP) do already exist in literature. However, these concepts have widely been neglected when conceptualizing and measuring CE.

CP is commonly defined as the consumer behaviour necessary for the successful service delivery (Revilla-Camacho, Vega-Vázquez, & Cossio-Silva, 2015). In contrast, CVP and CCB share the understanding of behaviours not necessarily required for successful service production (Groth, 2005). Overall, ideas of all three literature streams are closely related to CE, and, therefore, need to be considered when measuring CE.

In the sports context, a number of unique aspects of sports (e.g. value co-creation during a sport event, uncertainty of outcome) entail that engagement targeting other stakeholders (e.g. team or fans) are potentially more important for relational outcomes (e.g. loyalty) than the focal brand itself (organization). Hence, existing scales do not appropriately model CE in sports. For instance, Hollebeek et al. (2014) and Vivek et al. (2014) lack the interaction of consumers. Moreover, scales often focus on online contexts or lack consideration of CP, CVB and CCB.

Yoshida et al. (2014) are the first to conceptualize fan engagement (FE) under consideration of related literature streams. However, the proposed multidimensional construct (management cooperation, prosocial behaviour, performance tolerance) neglects FE in in-role situations, but solely focuses on 'helping'-dimensions without having an interaction and co-creation component in their scale.

These shortcomings indicate the need for a better theoretical conceptualization of CE in sport. Providing a conceptual framework for CE, aids sport managers segmenting and understanding fans' interaction processes in a sport context.

Conceptual framework

Based on the shortcomings of existing scales from CE (Vivek et al., 2014) and FE constructs (Yoshida et al., 2014) and on an interdisciplinary literature review, our conceptual framework addresses three issues: 1) CE can arise in several situations (e.g. stadium, sports bar) not all being of the same importance for sport fans and sport customers. Therefore, we propose a 2x2 matrix with online/offline and on-site/off-site CE behaviours. This helps to further distinguish different CE situations and thus, simplifying, adjusting measurement scales. 2) We propose a measurement scale which adds a component covering fan interaction to Yoshida et al.'s (2014) scale. Drawing on CVP and CCB literature (Groth, 2005; Revilla-Camacho et al., 2015), we further extend the scope of the original measurement items (prosocial behaviour towards fans, management cooperation, performance tolerance). 3) Moreover, we enlarge the perspective to customer groups who are not sport fans.

The framework acknowledges the complex structure of CE in the sport event context and improves measurement accuracy.

Implications

Given the paramount importance of engaging customers in sport, the development of a conceptual framework validly capturing and measuring CE in sport is necessary. The proposed framework thus provides a valuable tool for sports managers analysing and evaluating interaction processes with their fans arising in different settings. Interviews with sport managers should be used to adapt the proposed items to the specific context. In doing so, measuring CE will enable managers to derive the right strategies, strengthening their relationship to fans as well as fan to fan relationships and help to take action enhancing CE in sport marketing.

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