

# DOES SPURIOUS LOYALTY EXIST AMONGST PROFESSIONAL SPORT TEAM FANS?

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## Aim

Dick & Basu (1994) argued that some consumers could be behaviorally, but not psychologically, loyal to a brand. Called 'spurious' loyalty, it has been a contentious notion, but examples of spurious loyalty have been observed in many industries, including sport. The high involvement nature of the sport product, however, suggests that few consumers could consume large amounts of team sports without also developing some attitudinal loyalty. The current study is an investigation into whether spurious loyalty exists amongst team sports fans and to quantify the size and viability of that group if it does exist.

## Literature review

Spurious loyalty is most likely to occur in situations where consumers have only limited access to the brands they prefer, and as a result, must repeat-buy alternative brands in order to meet their basic needs (Backman & Crompton 1991). Mahoney, Madrigal & Howard (2000) remains the sole study to empirically examine Dick & Basu's framework in the context of sport fans. Although they claim to have identified spuriously loyal fans amongst the four convenience datasets of students they collected, the size of this segment was not given. This authors did acknowledge the importance of 'knowing what percentage of a team's fanbase falls into high, spurious, latent or low categories' (Mahoney et al. 2000, p.22) for marketing decision making.

In a sport context, a spuriously loyal fan is someone who is consuming relatively large amounts of team product (variously measured as game attendance, broadcast viewing, merchandise purchasing etc.) but has a low level of psychological commitment to that team. Mahoney et al (2000) posited this could occur as a result of a number of situations ranging from social interaction, receiving free tickets or geographic barriers preventing them from seeing their favourite team, and substituting a local team to keep sport involvement. The presence of spurious sport fans, however, seems contradictory conventional wisdom and research in sport management. Theoretical and empirical research suggest sport is a highly engaging product, with attendance being a strong driver of increased attitudinal loyalty with few repeat consumers remaining impartial about the contests (Doyle, Kunkel, & Funk, 2013; Funk & James 2001). Empirical evidence also indicates that individuals can adopt new teams very quickly and form strong attachments to multiple teams across leagues and sometimes within leagues (McDonald, Karg & Lock 2010). Holistically, this research suggests that it would be very difficult for a consumer to 'repeat-buy' a sport team product and remain psychologically unconnected to that team. Thus, we question the presence of 'spurious' fans amongst professional sport team consumers and seek to quantify the size of this segment and profile them in order to understand if it is a useful segment.

## Method

The primary data source used was an online survey of over 6,500 Australian adults who had an interest in professional sports. Respondents were obtained, and randomly invited to participate, through a professional research panel provider. Results were verified against separate surveys of season ticket holders of five professional sport teams. A range behavioral loyalty measures were collected, including games attended, games watched via broadcast, merchandise purchase. Attitudinal loyalty was measured using the level of team involvement (Doyle, Kunkel, & Funk, 2013) and a single item measure of self-reported fandom.

## Results and implications

Across the six large datasets examined, less than 2% of fans were observed to fit a spurious loyalty profile. In addition, when broadcast and live consumption were examined, the number classified as 'spurious' was drastically reduced. This is the first empirical study of spurious fans using a random sample of adult sport enthusiasts and the results would seem to differ from past work using student samples. The findings of the current study support the notion that team sports build attitudinal loyalty quickly amongst product consumers, and therefore encouraging behavior is important. There is a clear relationship between higher involvement in the team and wider interest in the sport. Thus, committed fans also consume the 'product' of other teams in the league. This can lead to the misidentification of these consumers as 'spurious' if media and live consumption are not given equivalent status, and multiple teams of support is not allowed. These datasets suggest that very few consumers of professional sport show high behavioral loyalty and low attitudinal loyalty, leading us to reject the notion of there being 'spurious' sport fans in all but extreme circumstances. Targeting them is therefore not recommended. Sport consumption seems likely to lead to positive attitude formation to the team, so it is behavior that should be encouraged.

## References

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