

A Meta Review Of Professional Sport Team Fan Loyalty.

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Introduction

Sport consumer behaviour is a critical area of investigation for sport scholars and has been studied extensively utilising many different theoretical lenses, frameworks and models. This working paper focuses on empirical research relating to repeated consumption and loyalty (including associated constructs such as psychological connection, allegiance, commitment, and involvement) of professional sport team consumers. While this phenomenon has been widely studied and there have been numerous conceptual review papers, to our knowledge, there has not yet been a systematic meta review of empirical research within this body of literature. Therefore, we aim to systematically and critically review the underlying theoretical basis and frameworks utilised in empirical studies with a loyalty-based outcome. To do this the following research question is posed: What are the most prominent theoretical lenses and frameworks utilised in sport management journals with empirical loyalty based outcomes? The results of this paper will provide scholars with a detailed understanding of the existing literature and guide future direction for research alongside propositions pertaining to gaps in our understanding and the appropriateness of underlying theoretical lenses and frameworks for exploring the same.

Literature review

The general field of consumer behaviour has roots in marketing, psychology, sociology, anthropology and, motivation research. As this line of inquiry progressed into sport management, the academy has focussed on motives for consumption and subsequent segmentation of consumers (e.g., Funk & James, 2001). The literature relevant to this study investigates repeated consumption where consumers develop a psychological connection, or loyalty, to the professional sport team. Professional sport teams are often the focus of study and will form part of the qualifying criteria for the inclusion of literature to be analysed.

The academy has drawn on a plethora of theoretical constructs and frameworks for investigating sport consumer loyalty. Despite the breadth of theoretical lenses utilised, there is little discussion and analysis in the literature on the use of the theory and relevant frameworks. As such, it is largely left to individual scholars to determine which lens best suits their study. This could be due to personal methodology or simply convenience — again, this is rarely discussed or justified in the literature. There also exists many published studies that lack a theoretical underpinning; Funk (2017) states that 17% of *Sport Management Review* articles did not explicitly inform the reader of the theoretical framework used. This leads the reader to question the reliability of the research, as after all, theory represents the fundamental aim of science (Kerlinger & Lee, 2000) and provides a foundation for research (Doherty, 2013). However, it must be noted that this has not fully escaped the attention of scholars: Funk, Beaton & Alexandris (2012) clearly state “that the vast majority of research on sport consumers fails to utilize a theoretical understanding of motivation to examine behaviour” (p. 355). More recently, Funk (2017) has published notes on this weakness within the literature and made calls for this deficiency to be rectified.

Research design

Sport Management Review, *Journal of Sport Management* and, *European Sport Management Quarterly* are all considered to be leading sport management journals. The literature to be reviewed in this study was published in these three journals since the start of the century until April 2017. All articles published in these journals relating to professional sport team consumer loyalty will be downloaded and coded based on the title, abstract, keywords, underlying/guiding theoretical lens, model or framework utilised, and context of the research (including location, demographics of sample, and the sporting team used as the focal point). The articles selected for inclusion in the review feature an empirical outcome that is based in the general parameters of loyalty briefly outlined above. Other papers, for example, conceptual or review articles will not be included in the dataset.

Implications

This research aims to provide the academy with a comprehensive understanding of the literature on empirical loyalty outcomes from studies involving professional sport teams. By understanding this literature and the underlying theoretical lenses and frameworks, scholars will be better placed to produce research that is consistent and comparable. Future directions for research will be identified alongside considered propositions for conducting research in the area of professional sport team loyalty. Implications for the academy

and practitioners will be discussed in regards to operationalising this body of literature to impact industry practices and contribute toward fan engagement. Full results will be presented at the EASM conference.

References

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