CONSUMER LOYALTY IN SPORT PARTICIPATION SERVICES

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Introduction

Although it is central in the mainstream marketing literature and the sport marketing literature dealing specifically with sport spectatorship, consumer loyalty has probably not received the attention this concept deserves in the field of sport participation organizations. As an illustration, we can notice the interesting and relevant article of Heere and Dickson (2008), who analyzed the nature of the concept of loyalty in sport marketing but only through the lens of sport fanship and spectatorship and only acknowledged in the conclusion of their study that the analysis could also matter to membership organizations. Not only does it apply to sport participation organizations but it also represents a crucial element for the development and the continuity of these organizations. As noticed by Robinson (2006), consumer expectations in sport participation services have been increasing whereas for other authors, such as Bodet (2009) and Seippel (2006) for instance, the nature of these expectations has also changed, creating a growing mismatch between participants’ demands and sport organizations’ offers. The mismatch created represents a serious threat for these sport organizations from a long-term perspective. Consumer loyalty appears then an almost necessary aim for sport participation organizations to maintain steady financial revenues and ensure a sustainable development.

As the specific sport marketing literature dealing with consumer or member loyalty is limited, it appears necessary to explore the mainstream marketing literature about services and the literature dealing with leisure activities as well to define the nature of the concept and identify its antecedents. The study of these different streams of literature allows the identification of different but complementary antecedents which represent potential levers of action for sport managers. On one hand, the mainstream marketing literature and the limited specific sport marketing literature mainly focus on the nature of the services offered and the way they are consumed and experienced, emphasizing the importance of the concepts of consumer satisfaction, perceived value and perceived service quality. On the other hand, the leisure literature focuses on the link between individuals and their leisure activities and the concepts of involvement and commitment in particular (some mainstream marketing studies have focused on the concept of commitment but in a business-to-business context for the majority of them). The lack of a clear understanding of how loyalty is formed in services in general and sport participation organizations in particular cries out for the association of the various variables identified.
in order to address the process of consumer loyalty in all its complexity. Specifically, the most recent frameworks tend to praise conceptualizations focusing on a mediating role of psychological commitment between consumer loyalty and its antecedents.

After having defined and presented the managerial importance of consumer loyalty, the chapter considers the different antecedents of the concept identified in the various streams of literature. These are then integrated into more comprehensive frameworks articulated around consumer psychological commitment.

Members’ loyalty in sport participation organizations

Historically, consumer loyalty has been conceptualized from a behavioral perspective, using indicators such as repeat purchase, proportion and frequency of purchase over time (Homburg and Giering, 2001). This vision, centered on the behavioral dimension of the concept, was later criticized by authors such as Day (1969) and Dick and Basu (1994), for whom sole behavioral loyalty only represents a spurious loyalty as no attachment is expressed to the brand, the service or the service provider which could make a consumer switch easily to another alternative or competitor. For these authors, an attitudinal dimension should be added to the behavioral dimension to fully understand the phenomenon of consumer loyalty. This bi-dimensional vision integrating both repeated purchase or retention and a positive attitude seems to have reached a consensus among the researchers on the topic (Homburg and Giering, 2001).

The reason why organizations in general and sport participation ones in particular should concentrate their efforts on increasing the loyalty of their consumers or members relies on the fact that it produces many positive organizational consequences. The primary argument relies on the fact that attracting and recruiting new consumers or members costs more than keeping the current ones loyal (Rosenberg and Czepiel, 1984). Furthermore, for Dick and Basu (1994: 99), consumer loyalty “represents an important basis for developing a sustainable competitive advantage . . . that can be realized through marketing efforts.” These authors also estimated that motivation to search for information, resistance to counter persuasion and positive word-of-mouth could be identified as consequences of consumer loyalty (Dick and Basu, 1994). Other authors (e.g. Ganesh, Arnold, and Reynolds, 2000; Hallowell, 1996; Iwasaki and Havitz, 2004; Reichheld and Teal, 1996; Jacoby and Chesnut, 1978) have also linked consumer loyalty to steady revenues, profitability, positive reputation, increases in price premiums and decreasing costs. From a sporting perspective, maintaining the number of participants also helps to achieve further social and political objectives such as enhancing citizens’ quality of life, developing community involvement and increasing participation rates (Iwasaki and Havitz, 2004). Moreover, from an individual perspective, Iwasaki and Havitz (2004) also noted that loyal participants can achieve personal goals such as improved skills, health, quality of life and self-expression as well as social rewards such as satisfying social relationships, experiencing a sense of belonging and enhancing their social identity. Nevertheless, despite its demonstrated managerial importance, consumer loyalty’s formative process is still misunderstood by both academics and practitioners, even if various antecedents of loyalty have been identified. The most important ones are presented in the following section.

The antecedents of consumer loyalty in sport participation

Five main antecedents are identified in the mainstream marketing, sport marketing and leisure literature and are presented as follows: consumer satisfaction, perceived value, perceived service quality, psychological commitment and enduring involvement.
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Consumer satisfaction

The first antecedent of consumer loyalty identified in the mainstream marketing literature is consumer satisfaction, which relies on the assumption that consumers satisfied by an offer would stay loyal to it. Many authors have considered the concept of satisfaction as the necessary premise for the retention of consumers (see Henning-Thurau and Klee, 1997 for a review). Consumer satisfaction has been classically defined as a post-choice evaluative judgment concerning specific purchase decisions (Oliver, 1980). This judgment is considered to integrate both cognitive and affective dimensions with a decrease of the affective dimension in the profit of the cognitive dimension over time following the consumption. A distinction is further made about the basis of satisfaction (Bitner and Hubbert, 1994; Olsen and Johnson, 2003). When consumer satisfaction deals with all the previous past experiences and interactions with a specific service or product, it is defined as overall or cumulative satisfaction, whereas when it only concerns a specific encounter or experience (often the most recent one) then it is defined as transaction-specific satisfaction (Bitner and Hubbert, 1994; Olsen and Johnson, 2003).

From an individual level of analysis, many studies found a positive link between consumer satisfaction and repurchase intentions (Henning-Thurau and Klee, 1997), for both overall and transaction-specific types of satisfaction. In the context of sport participation organizations, and most of the time in the health and fitness clubs context, authors such as Bodet (2008), Cronin, Brady and Hult (2000), De Barros and Gonçalves (2009), Ferrand, Robinson and Valette-Florence (2010), Howat, Murray and Crilley (1999), Murray and Howat (2002) and Pedragosa and Correia (2009) also supported this relationship. However, few studies have focused on the link between consumer satisfaction and repurchase behavior, and those which have studied it found this link to be weak or nonexistent (Henning-Thurau and Klee, 1997). In the case of sport participation, Bodet (2008) could not find a positive and significant relationship between both transaction-specific and overall satisfaction and membership renewal. Nevertheless, Ferrand et al. (2010) and Pedragosa and Correia (2009) found a positive and significant link between consumer satisfaction and frequency of participation. These results confirm the importance of taking into account both dimensions of consumer loyalty but also different types of behavioral loyalty as the status of the relationships strongly depends on the measures of the concepts considered.

Besides the broad majority of studies which focused on adult participation, it has been shown that parents’ negative attitudes towards the sport service organization and the service provided were significantly correlated with switching behavior in youth participation (Ferreira and Armstrong, 2002). Even if consumer satisfaction has not been systematically identified as a relevant antecedent of consumer loyalty in sport participation organizations, it still represents an important element for managers, for its own sake or for its positive organizational outcomes such as loyalty. Nevertheless, consumer satisfaction is not sufficient as it cannot predict the behavioral dimension of consumer loyalty and repurchase behavior in particular. Other determinants or antecedents of loyalty have to be identified (Oliver, 1999).

Finally, although the marketing literature has essentially focused on consumer satisfaction towards a sport provider, some authors (e.g. Boiché and Sarrazin, 2009; Iwasaki and Havitz, 2004) have focused on the general level of satisfaction towards a sport activity and Boiché and Sarrazin (2009) even found that participants’ level of satisfaction within the activity should be taken into consideration to prevent dropout from organized sport.
Consumer perceived value

Following Oliver’s (1999) observation regarding the need to find additional antecedents besides satisfaction, Cronin et al. (2000) theoretically and empirically demonstrated the importance of consumer perceived value alongside consumer satisfaction in the explanation of consumer behavioral intentions. Specifically, their model was validated within the participation sport industry. The underlying assumption is that satisfaction can only significantly influence consumer loyalty if the service is perceived to be of value, defined as a ratio between consumer costs and benefits (Zeithaml, 1988). In this context, if the various financial, psychological and social costs are not counterbalanced by the various perceived benefits associated with the sport practice in a specific organization then it is unlikely that consumer satisfaction would become sufficient to drive consumers’ behavior towards loyalty. Murray and Howat (2002) also supported the role of consumer perceived value in combination with customer satisfaction in the context of an Australian public sport and leisure center. These authors also identified that a positive perceived value could lead to satisfaction, which in turn would influence consumer future intentions. In line with this perspective, Boiché and Sarrazin (2009) found the value sport participants put on their activity appears to be an antecedent, when it is perceived as low, of dropout behavior from organized sport.

Even if several authors (e.g., Cronin et al., 2000; McDougall and Levesque, 2000; Murray and Howat, 2002) have called for study of both consumer value and satisfaction in the explanation of consumer post-experience intentions and behavior, few studies have dealt with both concepts simultaneously, and none have investigated the specific link between consumer perceived value and the behavioral dimension of loyalty.

Perceived service quality

Besides the question about its measurement (see for instance Ko and Pastore (2004) for a review of the measurements used in the recreation sport industry), the mainstream marketing literature mainly considers service quality to influence consumer loyalty through consumer satisfaction and consumer value. However, some authors have also supported a direct relationship between service quality and consumer loyalty (Cronin et al., 2000). In the sport participation sectors, researchers such as Alexandris, Zahariadis, Tsorbatzoudis and Grouios (2004), Lentell (2000) and Murray and Howat (2002) have mainly focused on the link between consumer perceived service quality and satisfaction, which was often found to be significant but to explain limited amounts of variance.

One of the potential explanations relies on the linearity of the relationship between the two concepts, which was not automatic for Bartikowski and Llosa (2004) and Llosa (1997). These authors considered that some service quality attributes have a linear or proportional contribution to consumer satisfaction (i.e. secondary and key elements) whereas some are performance-related (i.e. basic and plus elements), which means that their contribution to satisfaction will depend on how these elements are perceived to have performed. This framework was used by Bodet (2006) in a health and fitness context and this author confirmed the existence of the four different types of service attributes’ contribution to consumer satisfaction.

Nevertheless, few studies have tested the direct link between perceived service quality and consumer loyalty. Among the few, Alexandris, Dimitriadis and Kasiara (2001) looked at the link between perceived service quality and behavioral intentions in fitness clubs and found for instance that service quality dimensions were positively and significantly associated
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with purchase intentions but that some variations could be observed between the clubs investigated. Specifically, only the tangible dimension of service quality was positively and significantly associated with purchase intentions in all the three clubs surveyed, although the responsiveness dimension was never found to have a significant influence (Alexandris et al., 2001).

In the same vein, Cronin et al. (2000) empirically tested this relationship and found a positive link between perceived service quality and consumer behavioral intentions in several service industries and in participation sport. In relation with youth participation the quality of the service offered by sport organizations and in particular the guidance role of sport instructors have also been shown to have a noticeable influence on children’s switching behavior (de Martelaer, van Hoecke, de Knop, van Heddegem and Theeboom, 2002). Therefore, on the basis of these results it seems justified to postulate a direct link between perceived service quality and the attitudinal dimension of loyalty, even if the potential link with the behavioral dimension of the concept has yet to be proven.

Consumer psychological commitment

In their search for understanding the “psychology” behind the development of consumer loyalty, Pritchard, Havitz and Howard (1999) estimated that consumer psychological commitment to service organizations could be seen as an important determinant of consumer loyalty. Based on a conceptualization of consumer psychological commitment relying on resistance to change as its main evidence, the authors empirically found a positive and significant link with loyalty. The authors used a composite measure of loyalty, made up of attitudinal items and a ratio proportion of purchase. This relationship was later tested and supported by Iwasaki and Havitz (2004) in a health and fitness context. Unlike Pritchard et al. (1999), Iwasaki and Havitz (2004) used two behavioral indicators to measure consumers’ loyalty, which were frequency of attendance and proportion of participation in their fitness club in comparison with all the hours dedicated to their recreational and social activities per week.

In their conceptualization, both Iwasaki and Havitz (2004) and Pritchard et al. (1999) considered other factors, named commitment’s antecedent processes or formative processes, to directly influence resistance to change, the main evidence of psychological commitment, but also to theoretically have a direct influence on consumer loyalty. These antecedent processes were informational, identification and volitional. The informational processes comprise informational complexity, cognitive consistency and confidence, which means that the more individuals hold complex, consistent and trustful information about the sport participation organization, the more they will be committed and loyal to it (Pritchard et al., 1999). Identification processes refer to position involvement, which relates to the link and the consistency between consumers’ personal values and self-images and their sport organization preference, from their own point of view but also from a public perspective (Pritchard et al., 1999). According to Pritchard et al. (1999), the more consumers perceive this consistency, and believe that the public perceives it as well, the more they will be committed and loyal to the sport organization.

Last, volitional processes refer to the level of responsibility consumers have in the decision to consume a specific object (Pritchard et al., 1999), and thus to be part of a specific sport participation organization. Pritchard et al. (1999) supported several of the relationships between these commitments’ antecedents and loyalty but the results varied depending on the processes and the types of industry involved. As for Iwasaki and Havitz (2004), the
relationship between commitments’ formative processes and behavioral loyalty towards a recreation agency was not found to be significant. Even if these studies provided mixed results, it seems premature to provide a definitive judgment about the direct influence of consumer informational, identification and volitional processes on loyalty and more empirical results are therefore needed. It therefore seems relevant at this stage to make the managers of sport participation organizations aware of these processes because they seem to play an active role in the loyalty formation process.

For Heere and Dickson (2008), the conceptualization of consumer attitudinal loyalty and commitments is, however, often characterized by confusion and overlap, which may explain why the relationship between the two concepts is frequently validated although the relationship between consumer psychological commitment and behavioral loyalty has not been so often supported. Although developed in the sport spectatorship sector, Heere and Dickson’s (2008) critical analysis and definition propositions appear to be useful to apply in sport participation contexts.

**Enduring involvement**

Moving from the exchange or relationship approaches between a service provider – the sport participation organization – and its consumers – the participants – the leisure literature has widely studied the link between participants and their recreational activities in order to understand their loyalty towards both activity and recreation agencies. Adapting a definition from Rothschild (1984), Havitz and Dimanche (1999: 123) defined the concept of enduring involvement as “an unobservable state of motivation, arousal or interest toward a recreational activity or associated product” which is related to a specific object, activity or situation and which has drive properties. It seems that the researchers studying the concept (e.g. Funk, Ridinger and Moorman, 2004; Kerstetter and Kovich, 1997; Kyle et al., 2007) have reached a consensus over a multidimensional definition of involvement based on the framework developed by Laurent and Kapferer (1985). In this perspective, involvement comprises five facets or dimensions: importance, pleasure, sign, risk probability and risk importance.

The name and the nature of some of the dimensions were further discussed and sometimes modified in the contexts of leisure and sport activities (e.g. Funk et al., 2004; Iwasaki and Havitz, 1998, 2004; McIntyre and Pigram, 1992; Kyle et al., 2007), but these amendments still provide support for a multidimensional vision of involvement. In an extended review, Havitz and Dimanche (1999) identified some of the properties of involvement such as purchase decisions, search behavior and participation patterns, and recreation service promotion, some of which can be considered to be manifestations of loyalty. Moreover, for many authors high and enduring activity involvement levels are considered to be a precondition of consumer loyalty (Park, 1996). Specifically in the context of adult fitness programs, Park (1996) found a positive correlation between activity involvement and attitudinal loyalty profiles. The author then tested the relationship between enduring involvement and different indicators of behavioral loyalty. No significant relationship was found between enduring involvement and the duration of participation (i.e. length of relationship with this specific club), although a significant relationship was found between attitudinal loyalty and both intensity and frequency of participation. On the contrary, Iwasaki and Havitz (2004) could not find a significant direct relationship between consumer enduring involvement and frequency of attendance and proportion of participation although this was in a similar context of investigation. In conclusion, although many authors support the theoretical idea that high enduring involvement is a
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precondition to consumer loyalty the empirical results do not clearly support a direct relationship between the concepts.

It is, however, worthwhile to note that the nature of the influence of leisure activity and enduring involvement might be closely linked to the type and the number of offers in a specific sport market. If very few sport participation organizations are perceived to offer a certain kind of sport activities in a specific geographical area, it is likely that enduring involvement would play a significant role as practicing such activities would almost systematically be associated with a single service provider. This is probably the case for not-for-profit organizations in low-populated areas and when sport organizations have strongly differentiated positions and provide very different types of offers (e.g. local gym versus upmarket fitness center).

On the contrary, if consumers perceive many alternative offers for the same sport activity, it is likely that the role played by enduring involvement in loyalty would decrease as the pursuit of the sport activity would not depend on a single organization. If consumers decided to leave a specific sport organization they would still be able to maintain their involvement with their sport in another organization. It is nevertheless important to mention that a gap may exist between the consumers' perceptions of the offers available in a specific market and the reality of it as consumers' levels of awareness are extremely heterogeneous and the marketing promotion actions used by sport participation organizations are often limited, particularly for not-for-profit clubs.

Towards a mediating role of consumer psychological commitment

Although many antecedents to consumer loyalty have been identified in the literature, the exact nature of its formation process is still misunderstood. Specifically, many of these antecedents have been found to have direct influences on the attitudinal dimension of loyalty but few have been shown to have a clear direct influence on its behavioral dimension. It therefore appears necessary to analyze simultaneously both dimensions of loyalty to formulate a definitive judgment. Moreover, the previous conceptualization of consumer loyalty and its antecedents did not seem to grasp the dynamic at stake for such psychological processes. For these reasons, Iwasaki and Havitz (1998) proposed a sequential model where the formation of high levels of enduring involvement in an activity influences the development of psychological commitment(s) to various sport and recreation organizations which, in turn, influences both dimensions of loyalty. In this sequence, the authors conceptualized psychological commitment as composed of the commitment’s formative factors (i.e. informational, identification and volitional processes) and resistance to change. The overall model was later tested and supported by Iwasaki and Havitz (2004) in a health and fitness context. However, despite a significant relationship, the amount of variance of commitment’s formative factors explained by enduring involvement was very weak (i.e. 8 percent), which seems to call for another conceptualization.

Based on the results obtained by Iwasaki and Havitz (2004) and the antecedents of consumer loyalty identified in the marketing literature, Bodet (in press) has proposed a model focusing on the mediating role of consumer psychological commitment. Specifically, the model postulates that consumer satisfaction, perceived value, enduring involvement and the commitment’s formative factors (i.e. informational, identification and volitional processes) would influence resistance to change, considered as the main evidence of psychological commitment, which in turn would influence both attitudinal and behavioral loyalty. The model has been empirically tested in a health and fitness context and, even if the direct
relationships were found significant when attitudinal loyalty was analyzed, the overall model could not be fully supported (Bodet, in press). Moreover, no significant relationship was found between resistance to change and the different measures of behavioral loyalty which were length of relationship, frequency of participation and repurchase behavior (i.e. membership renewal) (Bodet, in press). Even if not fully satisfactory, these results tend to support the mediating role of consumer psychological commitment in consumer loyalty’s formation process in sport participation organizations and call for further improvements and/or replications in different sport participation contexts.

Another parallel route for investigation relies on the underestimated influence of personal and socio-situational factors on the formation process of loyalty. Iwasaki and Havitz (1998) reviewed many personal characteristics which were found or suggested in the literature to have an influence on enduring involvement, such as values or beliefs, attitudes, motivations, needs or goals, initial formation of preference, initial behavioral experiences, competence and skills, intrapersonal constraints and anticipation of personal benefits. Regarding the social-situational factors, Iwasaki and Havitz (1998) theoretically identified for instance social support from significant others, situational incentives, social and cultural norms, interpersonal and cultural constraints and anticipation of social benefits.

In their study, Iwasaki and Havitz (2004) tested the moderating influence of skill and competence, motivation, social support, social norms, satisfaction (with the leisure activity and not the organization) and side bets/sunk costs, and found that skill, motivation, social support and side bets all significantly moderated the effects of enduring involvement on commitment’s formative factors. Specifically, when individuals had low skills, low motivation, low social support and low side bets, the relationship was not found significant. These results could potentially explain why in some studies some relationships have been found significant whereas some have not, and highlight the importance of such moderating effects in the full understanding of consumer loyalty in sport participation organizations.

**Conclusion**

A core element of the relationship marketing approach, consumer loyalty is or should be the primary objective of sport participation organizations for all its organizational, sport and individual positive consequences. Unfortunately the literature dealing specifically with sport participation organizations is not rich enough, in comparison for instance with the sport spectatorship field, to provide a clear understanding of consumer loyalty’s formation processes, even if some antecedents have been identified. One explanation for such scarcity may be the fact that the majority of the sport organizations concerned are not-for-profit and show far less consumer orientation than their commercial counterparts. These sport organizations therefore probably need first to realize the importance of consumer loyalty and to put it at the center of their managerial strategies, which would in turn generate an increasing interest from academics and researchers.

This issue of consumer loyalty is increasingly important for sport managers as the demand for sport participation has been changing (e.g. Bodet, 2009; Heino, 2000; Loret, 1995; Seippel, 2006), which forces sport participation organizations to understand these new consumers’ expectations and desires before eventually adapting their offers. Historically, not-for-profit sport participation organizations have been mainly focused on the performance side of sport, often because sport managers and board members were former performance-oriented participants, which did not make the service offers well adapted to recreation-oriented participants. The objective of a marketing approach for not-for-profit sport organizations is
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not necessarily to make them target recreation-oriented and less-committed sport participants, but to make them aware of the plurality of consumers’ expectations and that their service offers might not be adjusted to all of them. Based on their identity, culture and organizational objectives, not-for-profit sport participation organizations may want – or not – to target these segments, but if they do so they need to understand that sport involvement is no longer the main driver for consumer loyalty and that, in increasingly competitive markets, they also need to focus on variables such as consumer satisfaction and perceived service quality, perceived value, identification, knowledge and commitment to keep their consumers loyal.

Commercial organizations are traditionally more consumer-oriented and thus more focused on the issue of consumer loyalty and its formation process, but the level of academic knowledge does not seem advanced enough to provide them with accurate answers about how they should practically proceed. For the moment, no consumer model has been able to predict consumer loyalty and it is difficult to determine whether it is due to inaccurate conceptualizations and methodologies or due to unpredictable behavior. Therefore, sport participation managers probably need to accept the fact that, despite their efforts and focus on loyalty’s antecedents, some consumers will still switch or defect. The crucial point for managers and academics, then, is to determine how many consumers correspond to this type and to clarify the levels of responsibility for and control of this behavior to determine if all their managerial efforts are worthwhile or not.

Note

1 Position involvement is different from sport and activity enduring involvement, which is analyzed later in this chapter.

References


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