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A process model of sport fan detachment

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Abstract

Within the field of sport marketing, scholarship to date has predominantly focused on the drivers of fan loyalty and allegiance, and the motivational aspects of fan behavior, at the expense of understanding the deterioration of the relationship between the sport consumer and sport team. Previous customer-brand relationship literature was integrated to propose and test a model of sport fan detachment. A qualitative study of lapsed season ticket holders was conducted to gain a deep understanding of the fan's individual lived experience. The findings contribute a four-part sequential process of a breakdown trigger, iterative decline, disengagement incident, and exit phase, to explain how a sport fan detaches from their chosen team. This process has significant managerial implications for team administrators since an understanding of each phase of the process provides opportunities to intervene, including tailored team communication and ticket packages.

Keywords: Detachment, process, sport marketing.

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Introduction

Loyal and engaged sport recreation consumers provide revenue opportunities from media rights, sponsorships and ticket sales that drive profitability for sport teams, corporate sponsors and sport media (Funk & Neale, 2006). A close and long-term relationship can thus lead to continuing exchanges, requiring lower marketing costs per customer (Ekinci, Ulengin, Uray & Ulengin, 2014). Recent declines in spectators across a number of sports, however, present new challenges to marketers in tough economic environments. Churn rates of season ticket holders are high, even though sport fans are supposed to be highly loyal. In spite of these growing concerns, sport marketing scholarship to date has predominantly focused on the drivers of fan loyalty and allegiance (Darcy, Funk, Lock & Taylor, 2012) and the motivational aspects of fan behavior (Funk, Mahony & Ridinger, 2002), at the expense of understanding the deterioration of the relationship between the sport consumer and sport team.

Funk and James (2001) developed the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) to explain how sport fans progress through four stages of team identification, namely awareness, attraction, attachment and allegiance. In their initial work (Funk & James, 2001) and subsequent theoretical framework refinement (Funk & James, 2006), the authors acknowledged the need for further research to explain how fans moved down the PCM continuum. Funk and James (2001; 2006) pointed to the lack of season ticket renewal as an indication of fan detachment, with season ticket holders widely regarded as the pinnacle of loyalty (Seiferheld, 2014). Research on season ticket holders suggests that external circumstances (McDonald & Stavros, 2007) as well as internal constraints and lack of attachment (Kim & Trail, 2010) may influence churn rates. These studies of season ticket holders, however, do not consider the process through which a fan's behavioral loyalty weakens. Farrelly (2010) demonstrated that the ending of a business relationship is a process, not an event. Process studies are "fundamental for gaining an appreciation of dynamic social life" (Van der Ven, 2007, p. 145) and involve explaining development in terms of the order in which things occur and stage in the process at which they occur. Most recently, McDonald, Karg and Leckie (in press, p. 13) highlighted the "on-going state of assessment and reappraisal" of season ticket holders, and called for further research on the disengagement process.

In spite of high season ticket churn rates, sport marketing scholarship has neglected the relationship deterioration process between the sport consumer and sport team. This study therefore contributes a four-part sequential process of a breakdown trigger, iterative decline, disengagement incident, and exit phase, to explain how a sport fan detaches from their chosen team. In this way, we provide greater understanding of how previously loyal sport fans disengage from their chosen team.

Statement of the problem

This research examines the dissolution process involved when previously loyal sport fans disengage from their chosen team. Specifically, the purpose of the study was to develop and test a process model of sport brand detachment. Our objectives were therefore to review previous detachment research in order to develop an appropriate research proposition, and then to test this conceptual model in a field study of sport fans. The following section reviews customer-brand relationship dissolution process models and associated triggers, to inform the study.

Detachment

Within sport marketing, Funk and James (2006) conceptualised attachment as a process that occurs when an individual assigns emotional, functional and symbolic meaning to a sport team. Attachments therefore only develop when a

brand has a strong connection with the individual, with the strongest form being when the brand is seen as an extension of oneself. In direct contrast to attachment, Canti and Mai (2008) defined detachment as a result of the need for the individual to maintain an emotional distance between himself and others. Relationships between people and brands endure a close resemblance to interpersonal relationships (Fournier, 1998), where detachment can be seen as a state prior to the termination of the brand-person relationship or affiliation. Brand detachment is therefore defined by Perrin-Martineq (2004, p. 1007) as the “psychological state of distance with regard to a brand, resulting from the weakening or the dissolution of the affective bond existing between a consumer and the brand.” In the context of sport marketing, the lack of season ticket renewal has been considered an indicator of this emotional and psychological distance, as a result of a weaker connection between the individual and their chosen sport team.

Dissolution process models

The customer-brand relationship literature provides some guidance on dissolution process models and associated triggers. An analysis of existing dissolution process models (Coulter & Ligas, 2000; Fajer & Schouten, 1995; Halinen & Tahtinen, 2002; Tahtinen, 2002) suggests that customers move through four phases, namely a breakdown trigger, iterative decline, a disengagement incident, and exit (Table 1).

Perrin-Martineq (2004) proposed that the detachment process in the termination of a person-brand relationship can be initiated or triggered by either an event or by an affective state of the consumer. These triggers include ‘brand switching’ to indicate a temporary shift from regular purchase of the brand (Fajer & Schouten, 1995). This can be indicative of mild dissatisfaction, consumer boredom or the need for variety. In contrast, ‘brand spurning’ is more permanent in nature as a result of a loss in customer satisfaction.

The loss may be due to poor product performance or incompatibility in the relationship. This ‘brand spurning’ category of triggers can range from factors inherent to the brand, such as the deterioration or change in quality (or lack thereof) to the style of the brand (Perrin-Martineq, 2004). Lastly, in higher order relationships or attached relationships, Fajer & Schouten (1995) suggested that compound product failures or a radical change in consumer liking criteria leads to ‘brand alienation’, which is defined as “a state of extreme, generalised dissatisfaction” (Fajer & Schouten, 1995, p. 665).

Table 1: Relationship Dissolution Process Models

Proposed sport brand detachment process	Fajer & Schouten (1995)	Coulter and Ligas (2000)	Halinen and Tahminen (2002)	Tahminen (2002)
Breakdown trigger	Breakdown: the weakening of a relationship resulting from intentional or unintentional disruption in its conduct.	Dissolution stage beginning with breakdown trigger: a factor that negatively impacts the current state of the relationship. Dissolution stage including a breakdown phase: the positive and negative experiences as the service relationship continues.	Assessment stage: the reassessment of the relationship and its future, including precipitating factors that act as impulses to end the relationship.	Consideration stage: the questioning of the relationship due to performance and relationship concerns.
Iterative decline	Decline: the affective reduction of liking or of loyalty, which may involve a re-classification of the relationship.		Dyadic communication stage: the potential decision is communicated to partner. This stage can include attenuating factors that act as exit barriers.	Restoration stage: the actions directed towards saving the relationship, which if unsuccessful sees the decline enter the disengagement stage. This stage can include all communication concerning the decision to end or continue the relationship.
Disengagement incident	Disengagement: the interpersonal communication and behavior that leads towards withdrawal.	Dissolution stage ending with determinant incident: any factor that causes the customer to terminate the service relationship. Exit stage: customer leaves their service provider, either voicing dissatisfaction or not, and considers repatronage intentions	Disengagement stage: the final precipitating factors that end the relationship, including performance failures and alternative attractions.	Disengagement stage: the breaking of the bonds, activity links and resource ties between the partners.
Exit	Dissolution: the termination of the relationship, either through negotiation or unilateral withdrawal.		Network communicates and aftermath stage: the period during which the consequences of the relationship break-up are dealt with, including mental processing of the final breakup.	Enabling and aftermath stage: the actions to destroy the barriers in order to make the ending possible, explain the process, and mentally safeguard the parties after it.

Consumer liking criteria, such as changes to an individual's needs, values and preferences, have received some attention as dissolution triggers in this third category (Perrin-Martinenq, 2004). Evidence for the proposed first phase of the brand detachment process is summarized in Table 1. The breakdown trigger phase is common across existing dissolution process models.

The second proposed phase of an iterative decline recognises that the slide towards disengagement is not automatic or immediate. Fajer and Schouten (1995) included a decline phase in their model, which involved a possible negative reclassification of the relationship. Coulter and Ligas (2000) emphasized both positive and negative experiences, as well as periods of apathy, in their dissolution phase, suggesting an iterative process of assessment over a period of time. The possibility of positive "exit barriers," and the communication related to this back and forth process, has also been highlighted (Halinen & Tahtinen, 2002; Tahtinen, 2002).

Within the broader consumer behavior literature, customer-brand relationships were found to grow and evolve over time due to increased experience, and iterative feedback loops (Hollebeek, 2011). Brodie, Hollebeek, Ilić and Jurić (2011) specifically proposed that customer engagement occurs in the context of an iterative, dynamic process of a service relationship that co-creates value. It can therefore be expected that a similar iterative phase is part of the process through which a consumer disengages from their chosen team.

Our proposed sport brand detachment process includes a disengagement incident as the third phase. If communication related to the possible negative reclassification of the relationship does not lead to restorative actions, then disengagement is likely to happen. Connections between the two parties, including resource ties, weaken as the final precipitating factors lead to withdrawal (Halinen & Tähtinen, 2002; Tähtinen, 2002). The breakdown in relationship is finally marked by a determinant incident, which causes the customer to end the relationship. The determinant incident can be either service, market, self or other related (Coulter & Ligas, 2000). This incident can also include the active search for alternatives or the trial of a new brand (Fajer & Schouten, 1995).

The final phase of the proposed sport brand detachment process is exit. This phase refers to the termination of the relationship, either through negotiation or simple withdrawal (Fajer & Schouten, 1995). In the Coulter and Ligas (2000) study the informants exited in one of three ways; without notification, active confrontation with the service provider, and by passively writing a letter to announce the departure. These activities are aimed at lowering any barriers to exit that may exist (Tähtinen, 2002). During this phase, the ending of the relationship is internalised and made final. The internalisation process may

include a reflective period of sense-making, where the parties mentally retrace the ending (Halinen & Tähtinen, 2002). The aftermath of the exit includes possible repatronage intentions, especially if the dissolution was weaker (Coulter & Ligas, 2000). The review of consumer-brand relationship literature therefore suggests the following proposition:

P₁: The sport fan dissolution process follows a four-part sequential process of a breakdown trigger, iterative decline, disengagement incident, and exit phase.

Methodology

Research design

In order to investigate the sport fan detachment process, qualitative in-depth interviews were employed to gain a deep understanding of the fan's individual lived experience (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). In order to build rapport with the interviewees, appropriate warm up and background processes were followed, including explaining the nature of the study in everyday language and in the interviewee's context. A retrospective interview method was employed to understand season ticket holder experiences (Darcy et al., 2012).

Participants

A championship-winning Super Rugby franchise in South Africa was selected to provide a list of lapsed season ticket holders. Although the franchise ranked as one of the largest provincial rugby team fan base in South Africa in 2012, the team suffered double digital declines in its fan base that year. Lapsed season ticket holders of the franchise were therefore appropriate to investigate fan detachment as the team enjoyed widespread yet declining support.

A probability sample of lapsed season ticket holders were contacted to determine their eligibility and interest in being interviewed. The concept of saturation was employed by analyzing interview transcripts at regular intervals and interrogating emerging themes (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994), with this point reached after 14 interviews of approximately 40 minutes each, conducted over two months in mid-2013.

Instrumentation

Interview guideline questions included "Please tell me all of the events that led up to you terminating your season ticket with the franchise," "Please tell me if there was any time in the process where it took you some time to make sense of what was happening," and "Please can you explain the process you went through from first realizing that you wanted to suspect your ticket to acting on it." A

directed content analysis approach was followed given the development of the conceptual model (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This approach is preferred when deductive reasoning is used to pre-define a set of codes based on the research proposition (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A coding framework was developed within Atlas.ti, then used to assigned specific theme codes to interviewee quotations, and iteratively re-contextualized by using the searching, sorting and assembling functions of the computer software (Basis, 2003). Following Corden and Sainsbury (2006), pseudonyms have been used to retain anonymity.

Results

The findings provide evidence of the sport brand detachment process following a four-part sequential process of a breakdown trigger, iterative decline, disengagement incident, and exit phase. Following the theory-guided presentation direction provided by Chenail (1995), the findings relating to each phase are discussed below. Table 2 provides selected interviewee examples as a summary of the findings. Three of our interviewees provide examples of long-time season ticket holders who declined to renew. Ruaan, Stefan and Eugene had been season ticket holders for over a decade before negative stadium experiences and the questioning of the ticket value proposition triggered the breakdown in their relationship with the franchise.

We thought for what we get it became very expensive, compared to what you pay for and get at other stadiums it was a huge difference, I even wrote an email and there was in fact no response. (Ruaan)

In one game the people were smoking, you sit in the open but the person in front of you smoked all the time, that is very difficult. I did not want to sit there with that and then were drunk people around and they were swearing and making a noise – I had my kids with me, it was not nice. (Stefan)

The safety of your vehicle... so whilst sitting there watching the match and trying to enjoy the match, at the back of your head you are thinking – is my vehicle still safe. I felt that if one had season tickets for 30 odd years then one can maybe... some privilege around parking (Eugene).

The breakdown trigger phase was followed by an iterative decline over a period of time, in which additional negative experiences resulted in a reclassification of the relationship. For Ruaan and Stefan, these experiences related to the quality of the game experience, while in Eugene's case his companion become less interested in attending.

Table 2: Summary of selected interviewee findings

Sport brand detachment process	Brian	Elan	Anna	Tennis
Breakdown trigger	<p>It was our first or second home game of the season and the Bulls got thrashed. With 10 minutes left to the game the stadium was almost empty, my friend and I actually left a lot of our stuff there, the flags, the hats, we left them on the seats and left.</p>	<p>I think it was when the boys started playing cricket, I missed at least half of the games, it cost me a lot of money, I can rather spend that money on cricket equipment and extra lessons and stuff, instead of going to half of the games. I could not say to my kids – sorry I am leaving now, I am going to the rugby, it does not work like that.</p>	<p>I was on my own, I had to rebuild my life.</p>	<p>I missed games, I started thinking it's not worthwhile to go to all; it is much easier to sit here and look at it on the television.</p>
Iterative decline	<p>We always would debate whether we would get seasonal tickets but inevitably we knew we would, but it was a case of should we, shouldn't we, then we would weigh up how many games we would go to... just before cut off for seasonal ticket renewal we would always renew, but we actually in the end did not make use of them as much as we should have.</p>	<p>Over the time I was attending less games. It is quite expensive now, I had my season ticket for over 20 years, why can't I qualify for a discount, I have supported them for so many years.</p>	<p>I was trying to see if there was another way where other friends can go because I was missing it.</p>	<p>Sometimes when you sit here and you see the game and you see the crowd, you get that "eish" feeling, I want to go back and then I said no, it's difficult, we can't.</p>
Disengagement incident	<p>And then my friend emigrated in 2012, so we did not renew. It really would not have been the same going with someone else, it sounds quite soppy but that is the truth. It's just not the same.</p>	<p>When they sent me the renewal form, I decided then not to renew. There is no cost benefit for doing it and to keep doing it. I asked my wife and she agreed with me.</p>	<p>My uncle moved away and he's not there to support me financially.</p>	<p>When that game is finished you arrive home the next morning, because of the traffic, the people, they want to park afterwards and that put me down, I am not... I don't use alcohol and when that is hanging around, I can't handle it.</p>
Exit	<p>This year if I have caught 50% of the Bulls games I would be lucky. I have some other mates who are quite strong Bulls supporters, so next year I might think about getting season tickets again. As much as I love the Bulls, I am a very staunch supporter, do I want to go and watch a team that loses every week, I don't think so.</p>	<p>I don't think I will renew it in the next 2 to 3 years; my boys are very busy with their cricket. I love to be sitting there, it is completely different to watching it on TV, people will say you can see better on the TV but the vibe and the stuff is not there. If they gave me 50% discount I would think about it.</p>	<p>I haven't had a chance at all to go after that. I think if I had to meet a soul mate that enjoys my passion for that then the two of us can have our crowd of friends and stuff and start doing that and buying tickets together.</p>	<p>It just came over time, wait for it to run out. Not renew at this stage, maybe when I am on pension, yes, that is not too far, then maybe. That time and things change, I can't really tell you.</p>

I think it built up over time: we didn't like the style of rugby that the team was playing, we were sick and tired of this type of play. Then they decided on these horrible pink jerseys, they were the laughing stock, people whistled and it must affect you. Then at least an hour before kickoff we would be sitting in our seats and a couple of minutes before the game starts other people now want to find their seats, now the games starts and they walk in front of you and you can't see. (Ruaan)

It took me 3 or 4 years to decide that I am not going to go anymore, I did not go that often in the past, it was just not worthwhile going. I think the way they played rugby for the past 20 years was best, but they have changed, I don't like the way they are playing now. (Stefan)

It was actually a phasing out process for me, over a couple of years, having had the two tickets for a long time, then during that time my lady friend attended the rugby with me, then it was by mutual agreement that we both decided that it was not worthwhile me renewing her ticket so I just phased that ticket out and I went for one ticket. Then obviously other factors came in, I had to also go alone, that is not as pleasant as going with someone, at the end of the season you have to decide to either renew or not renew. (Eugene)

The final disengagement incident for Ruaan was a further negative stadium experience and the feeling that his complaints were not being heard. The lack of interest by Stefan's children was the factor that ended his season ticket relationship with the franchise, especially given his previous negative stadium and game experiences. Eugene's holiday travel outside the country during the rugby season served as an alternative attraction that caused him to terminate the service relationship.

The last thing that really made us decide to stop going there was a man sitting in the season ticket section who was rude, swearing about our team, it was most unpleasant. I then decided if this is what it is going to be like I am not going to go anymore. There is no control over who enters the main grandstand and who sits where. When these season tickets came up for renewal at the end of last year we had a discussion about it, it was not a decision that was taken overnight or lightly, we chatted for an hour or half an hour. I can tell you it was really sad, we took the decision and we did not feel good about it at all, the children were very surprised. (Ruaan)

I am also older now, I thought my kids would be interested to go and see the games, but they are not interested, that is more the reason why I did not renew. Someone did phone me and ask me if I was going to renew and I said no. (Stefan)

I went to Namibia last year for 6 weeks and that was 6 weeks in the rugby season, between March and May, where I actually also lost out on a number of games while I was still the holder of a season ticket. (Eugene)

In terms of the exit phase, Ruaan and Eugene expressed sadness as they mentally processed the withdrawal. Ruaan justified his decision by perceiving the stadium experience as more difficult, less comfortable, though perhaps more enjoyable. Eugene and Stefan used the opportunity to purchase single game tickets as part of their justification for the decision taken.

In the end we decided that given all these factors it is much easier and much more pleasant to sit at home and watch the match in high definition and you don't have all these problems and costs and everything. We knew that we were going to miss the enjoyment of watching the rugby first hand, there is a real difference watching it on TV and being there. We have never been back to the stadium, we have never bought a ticket for a particular game. (Ruaan)

I have made my decision and wouldn't reinstate my season tickets. I do buy tickets every now and again, mainly for friends though, I will go and watch a game every now and again. I am watching more on the TV now, TV has changed it. (Stefan)

Its an easy process to stop with it, you just opt out, you just don't renew it, they do send you a couple of reminders or whatever. Basically I feel a bit sad about the fact that there is nothing from the Rugby Union side to enquire what was your reasons or if there were any reasons. If there is a game I really want to see I can always arrange a ticket and then just go for that once or twice. (Eugene)

In summary, the examples of Ruaan, Stefan, and Eugene demonstrate the four-part sequential process of a breakdown trigger, iterative decline, disengagement incident, and exit phase, for longer-term season ticket holders.

For Ruaan, the focus was on the ways in which the franchise had changed and how his experience of the game, stadium and other spectators had become negative, based on the actions of the franchise. In contrast, Eugene recognized that he had changed over time, especially in terms of his more recent companion and alternate interests. Stefan provides an example of a balanced perception, where his focus during the process was on both changes to his own life and to his chosen franchise.

Discussion

This study contributes a four-part sequential process to explain how a sport fan detaches from their chosen team. The findings provide evidence of a four-part sequential process for season ticket holders. Initially the process is triggered by an interpersonal, intrapersonal or structural event or constraint that sparks the breakdown process (Crawford, Jackson & Godbey, 1991).

The breakdown process is cyclical or iterative in nature and is characterized by a number of positive or negative events that either reinforce the sports fan-sports team relationship, or break it down. The phase to break down the bond between the fan and the sports object takes place over time. Eventually a determinant event leads to a cost/benefit evaluation by the sports fan.

At this point the cycle of negative experiences or constraints leads to a point where the costs outweigh the benefits of the season ticket and active support of the team. The exit phase is characterized by an active or passive termination of the season ticket, communicated to the team ticket administrators.

This process has significant managerial implications for team administrators since an understanding of each phase of the process provides opportunities to intervene, including tailored team communication and ticket packages. The process model of sport fan detachment provides a framework through which sport administrators and front office managers can profile their existing base of season ticket holders.

The findings of this study can be used to understand the extent to which the fan may be detaching themselves from the team, especially in terms of the precipitating factors that may be contributing to ending the relationship. Importantly, our findings point to the possible effectiveness of restorative actions (Halinen & Tähtinen, 2002) during the iterative decline leading to the disengagement incident. Specifically, ticket packages can be tailored to increase flexibility for those facing interpersonal or shorter-term financial constraints.

As demonstrated by the growing secondary ticket market (Shapiro & Drayer, 2012), teams are able to influence the cost/benefit evaluation by allowing season ticket holders to sell tickets to individual games. The findings highlight the role of ongoing fan communications and relationship building to address any negative experiences and reinforce positive team identity. McDonald (2010) pointed to the lack of communication tailored to meet the needs of different fan or season ticket holder segments. Our findings suggest that this communication becomes increasingly important as the fan's attachment declines iteratively, and that more long-term season ticket holders display a longer iterative decline.

Limitations of the study and directions for future research

As a qualitative study of lapsed season ticket holders of a single rugby franchise, the findings cannot be generalized to a broader population. The qualitative data coding approach did allow the researchers to generalize theory grounded in the data (Basit, 2003). A challenge of the qualitative research design was the volume of data that needed to be managed. Although using Atlas.ti reduced this difficulty to some extent, some relationships and themes may not have been highlighted in this analysis.

The study was largely based on behavioral observations, while possible affective changes were not comprehensively captured. The finding of a four-part sequential process to explain how a sport fan detaches from their chosen team raises additional questions. Firstly, future research should investigate whether the process is evident among lapsed season ticket holders of other teams and sports, especially in larger sport markets such as the United States, India and China.

The development of an appropriate quantitative survey instrument to more accurately measure the importance of each phase of the process, as well as the relative impact of different precipitating factors, would contribute to these questions.

The recent work by McDonald, Karg and Leckie (in press) using the Juster Scale to predict season ticket holder churn is an example of how these efforts can assist. Lastly, an opportunity exists to consider other segments of loyal fans that may be detaching from their chosen teams, beyond using season ticket holder churn.

Conclusion

This study of sport fan detachment addresses the challenge of declines in sport spectators facing marketers in tough economic environments. In spite of high season ticket churn rates, sport marketing scholarship has neglected the relationship deterioration process between the sport consumer and sport team.

Our finding of a four-part sequential process of a breakdown trigger, iterative decline, disengagement incident, and exit phase provides greater understanding of how previously loyal sport fans disengage from their chosen team.

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