



The tie that blinds? Developing and validating a scale to measure emotional attachment to a sport team



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 July 2014

Received in revised form 6 January 2015

Accepted 14 January 2015

Available online 26 February 2015

Keywords:

Emotional attachment
Sport fan behaviour
Marketing

ABSTRACT

The emotional bond between a fan and his/her favourite team is one of the most distinct attributes of spectator sport. Yet to this point, little has been done to empirically explore this unique phenomenon. The purpose of this study was to create and validate an emotional attachment to a sport team scale. Guided by attachment theory and following a well-established scale development framework, a two-factor, seven-item scale was found to be a valid and reliable instrument. The two distinct factors termed Investment (cognitive feelings put into the team) and Dividend (affective feelings derived from the team) represent a unique contribution to the field of sport management. In addition, a construct validity test provided quantitative verification of an apparent hierarchy of the emotional attachment dimensions where those with higher Investment scores appear to place a higher (somewhat irrational) value on team success compared to those with higher Dividend scores.

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1. Introduction

Individuals are exposed to an abundance of products daily. Only a small amount of these products, however, inspire an internal connection (Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005). These links, when amplified over time, can lead to product attachment. This connection serves as a vital occurrence for marketing professionals, as signs of positive product attachment typically equate to an increased probability for consumption (Ball & Tasaki, 1992; Grisaffe & Nguyen, 2011; Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010). In fact, research has shown that high attachment levels can influence a consumer to feel as if the product is so valuable, that ceasing overall consumption of related items is a viable option when that brand is not available (Thomson et al., 2005). As a result, organizations persistently strive to create brand attachments as opposed to emphasizing mere exposure.

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A key component in the attachment process is the presence of emotion (Bowlby, 1979; Fedorikhin, Park, & Thomson, 2008). When individuals develop affections or strong bonds towards others, the exuding of corresponding emotions serves as a by-product and a foundational element that strengthens the connection (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). Bowlby (1979) claimed that “many of the most intense of all human emotions arise during the formation, the maintenance, the disruption, and the renewal of affectional bonds” (p. 69). From a marketing and consumer behaviour standpoint, however, the examination of emotional attachment to brands has been limited (e.g., Grisaffe & Nguyen, 2011; Thomson et al., 2005). Perhaps this is due to the banality or simple utility of most products and services; regardless, there is an opportunity to learn more about the impact of emotion within product attachment.

Contrary to most other products and services, spectator sport is ripe with emotion. Given the impalpable and unpredictable nature of the sport product, sport fans cultivate extraordinary levels of emotional affinity (Knobloch-Westerwick, David, Eastin, Tamborini, & Greenwood, 2009). In addition, the level of intimacy between a fan and the sport product is arguably unparalleled (Giulianotti, 2002). Hirt, Zillman, Erickson, and Kennedy (1992) found that avid fans are so emotionally connected to a team that they feel game outcomes directly impact them. Additionally, given the vast propensity for expectancy disconfirmation in sport contests, attachment is a vital construct to study, as research has supported its ability to persuade continued consumption (Koo & Hardin, 2008; Kwon & Armstrong, 2004; Robinson & Trail, 2005). As such, the study of emotional ties and the corresponding behaviour should be of high value to sport teams and leagues.

Within their seminal Psychological Continuum Model (PCM), researchers Funk and James (2001, 2006) signified that an emotional connection is a key attribute in differentiating one’s attachment from a one’s attraction to a team. And while several scales exist within the sport management literature that measure and assess fan attachment to sport teams (e.g., Kwon, Trail, & Anderson, 2005; Robinson & Trail, 2005; Robinson, Trail, & Kwon, 2004; Trail, Robinson, Dick, & Gillentine, 2003), little has been done to generate knowledge specifically related to *emotional* attachment. Koo and Hardin (2008) segmented sport fans by emotional attachment based on the previous work of Robinson et al. (2004) and Trail et al. (2003). Gladden and Funk (2002) created a four-item Affect factor within their Team Association Model that measured emotions elicited from evaluations of sport team outcomes. Despite these endeavours, an opportunity exists to generate sport-specific knowledge related to emotional attachment. Marketing researchers and practitioners alike such as Huang (2001), Passikoff (2014), and Heath (2012) have signalled the effectiveness and growing trend of emotion-based branding strategies. For sport marketers and managers, harnessing the power of emotion also represents a noteworthy opportunity. Whether in the form of inherent drama or an intimate connection, emotion is an undeniable quality of spectator sport. However, to this point, it is not known what attributes comprise emotional attachment to a sports team. Given this need, the purpose of this study was to develop and validate a parsimonious instrument to measure emotional attachment to sport teams (EAST). It was guided by Bowlby’s (1979) attachment theory and utilized Churchill’s (1979) framework for developing sound marketing instruments.

2. Review of literature

2.1. Theoretical framework: attachment theory

While rooted in human-to-human connections, attachment theory has been extended to a number of fields, most notably consumer behaviour (e.g., Park et al., 2010) and even sport (e.g., Koo & Hardin, 2008). As per Bowlby (1979), the theory of attachment refers to “the propensity of human beings to make strong affectional bonds to particular others” (p. 127). And while the name implies a focus solely on the cognitive form of attachment, Mikulincer and Shaver (2005) argued that Bowlby’s (1982) attachment theory is a fundamental framework for understanding the regulation of human emotions. In fact, it has been extended to understand the emotional consequences of close relationships (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002), the development of consumer trust in e-commerce (Chen & Dhillon, 2003), and most notably, utilized in the scale development procedures of emotional attachment to brands and brand extensions instruments (Fedorikhin et al., 2008; Thomson et al., 2005). As a result, it was used as the guiding framework for the current study’s exploration of emotional attachment to sport teams.

According to Bowlby (1979), the conceptualization of the attachment process commenced with the study of the relationship between child and mother in the year proceeding birth. While developing, infants require an intimate relationship with someone who will nurture them, which is delegated to the mother (Cassidy & Shaver, 2008). During this period, infants rely heavily on their mothers, not only for survival and protection purposes, but also for comfort and satisfaction (Bretherton, 1992).

This dependence influences the child to covet a consistent motherly presence. These cravings, thus, demonstrate signs of attachment. For instance, the strength of the attachment in a relationship is often characterized by the degree of emotional expressions exuded by the child (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). Positive attachment emotions can range from adoration to feelings of superiority due to the association, while negative emotions can encompass feelings of anger. While emotional types vary over time, attachment behaviours share the goal of an internal desire for closeness and a regulation of affection. Hence, the behaviour is goal-directed and reactionary (Cassidy & Shaver, 2008). Nevertheless, Bowlby (1979) posited that attachment behaviours are not always a product of congenial associations, as with a negative mother-child relationship, and the attachment craving still exists. This demonstrates a multidimensional aspect to attachment, amalgamating a natural bond between child and mother, along with sensual, comforting desires (Schultz, Kleine, & Kernan, 1989). While rooted in

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