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Perceived relationship quality dimensions between basketball fans and clubs: Eskisehir basket example

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Abstract

In recent years the importance of relationship quality in sport organizations have increasingly emphasized by both researchers and practitioners, because of the general belief about relationship marketing efforts can enhance relationships with sport consumers. Therefore, the researchers aimed to put forth the perceived dimensions of relationship quality between basketball fans and basketball clubs in the current study. The results showed that constructs about relationship quality could be conceptualized and measured as a three-dimensional construct comprising commitment, self-connection and intimacy, relationship satisfaction.

Keywords: Relationship marketing, relationship quality, relationship quality dimensions, sport consumers, basketball fans

INTRODUCTION

In today's world, spectating of sport is a growing interest and the most popular leisure activity for a long time and sport fan segment represents the largest proportion of sport industry (Trail and James, 2001). Sport spectators are very important not only by ticket sales but also for television broadcasting and sponsorship revenues. Also, sport fans attend their teams' games and they purchase licensed merchandise, so they provide direct income to their clubs. In a considerable body of research in the literature has focused on sport fans including; social and psychological features of sport fans (Wann, 1997), demographic and personality characteristics of sport fans (Schurr et al., 1987), team identification of sport fans (Dietz-Uhler and Murrell, 1999), sport fan commitment and attendance to games (Kerstetter and Kovich, 1997; Laverie and Arnett, 2000), fans' physiological connections to sport teams (Trail and James, 2001), perceptions of sport fans (Wann and Dolan, 1994), sex differences in sport fan behavior (Dietz-Uhler et al., 2000) and sport fan loyalty (Madrigal, 1995). In these studies, it has been shown that commitment level of sport fans to the teams is the main predictor of sport fan behavior and this indicates the ascending or descending loyalty levels of sport fans. As in those studies and Kim (2008) stated sport fans are more interested in sport more than other issues (economy, politics etc.) and their loyalty to their teams only participate sport just to have good time.

Sport fans are so important for the clubs because of drawing their strength from fans, by attending games, purchasing licensed merchandise, consuming sport by media. But, sport fans have dreams, hopes and desires from the teams they support and that may depart from the reality of their teams' performance. If the fans' dreams about their teams fall through they will drift away in a rather passive manner, and give supporting their club over (Adamson et al., 2006). By being aware of these challenges sport marketers have recognized the growing importance of customer-oriented approaches. Industry of sports has significant benefits from the success of sport spectating for a long time but the industry is facing with a change in last years. Although the sport organizations income is growing tremendously their costs are also increasing in parallel with this progress. Sport organizations are having some advantages and disadvantages by rapidly changing and evolving technologies. Thus, sport clubs managers and marketers should focus on retaining existing customer rather than acquiring new customers in a competitive and saturated market. Because gaining a new customer is more expensive and difficult than retention of existing customers (Fornell and Wernerfelt, 1987; Reichheld and Sasser, 1990). In order to keep existing customers (fans) as well as gaining new ones sport clubs must focus on modern marketing approaches. Therefore, to keep fans and gain their loyalty sport clubs must get to know fans' wants and needs. To understand to fans' wants and needs and meet them is a key consideration to satisfy them while managing and marketing the sport clubs.

Marketers believe that organizations ultimately achieve success by satisfying customers' needs (Kotler, 1997) and in the marketing concept; all parts of an organization are oriented toward solving problems of customers. There's an integrated and companywide approach in which all the firm's activities are directed toward providing customer satisfaction called customer orientation (Kotler and Armstrong, 1980). Customer orientation improves the satisfaction and value attributed to an exchange to ultimately behavioral outcomes and thus an organization benefits from having a customer orientation. Being customer oriented and thus focusing on customers is an apparent for companies with strong brands as brands clearly provide a key element of corporate strategy for many organizations (Cravens and Guilding, 2000). According to Kohli and Jaworski (1990) customer orientation involves taking actions based on marketing intelligence. They identified market

intelligence as a broad concept including exogenous market factors affecting customer current and future needs and preferences.

In sport, customers (fans) provide income through buying tickets to games and licensed merchandise as well as indirect earnings through sponsors and TV agreements. Sport fans' loyalty levels are assumed to be much greater because of their unique characteristics when compared with traditional customers (Furuholt and Skutle, 2008) and this has led to a belief by most sport organizations that they can take their fans loyalty for granted (Adamson et al., 2006). However, sport fans might drift away if their team loses regularly. They stop attending their teams' games, purchasing licensed merchandise or watching via television. Thus, it is important for sport clubs to manage relationships with their fans for long-term success. Because building good relationships with customers increase their loyalty. However, the characteristics of sport fans need consideration when developing and implementing relationship management techniques. In sport industry, the necessity of having good and long-term relationships between sport clubs and fans, sport managers and sport marketers are focusing fan-oriented approaches. Fan orientation can be defined as the delivery and continue of the service in terms of fans' needs and expectations. The more fans are communicated; sport clubs get the more information about fans' wants and needs. Thus, sport clubs provide a fan-oriented service and affect the perceptions of fans.

An excellent quality of service offered to customers is considered to be the organization could achieve a competitive advantage, increased customer loyalty, corporate image and business performance (Choi and Chu, 2001; Kim and Cha, 2002). Fan-oriented approaches provide sport clubs fan satisfaction, long-term relationships and loyalty. To be qualified as a fan-oriented sport club, the properties of the service delivered by a sport club are very important. For example, whenever a customer interacts with the organization in person or via technology (telephone, e-mail etc.), a service encounter occurs. During the encounters customers receive a snapshot of the organization's quality and each encounter contributes to the customers' overall satisfaction (Bitner, 1995; Kim and Cha, 2002). Hence, the sport clubs' service performance and features establish the basis of the relationship between sport clubs and sport fans.

Regarding the professional sports industry, two sports branches; soccer and basketball are the most popular professional sport branches in Turkey. Researches on sport spectating and sport fans on relationship quality try to develop a model for relationship connections with individuals' experiences with sports or sport teams (Wann et al., 2001; Kim and Cha, 2002). They define sport fan as individuals who are interested in and follow sport, sport team or a sport club. Sport fans are those who actively witness a sport event in person or through on TV, radio or Internet. The fact that sport fans identify themselves with their sport teams; it is an important facet when attempting to understand fan behavior. Thus, the researchers used relationship quality scale developed by Kim (2008) to put forth the perceived relationship quality dimensions between basketball clubs and their fans. The aim of the research is to make contribution to the current literature in a number of ways. Based on previous researches (Kim, 2008; Kim et al. 2009, Kim and Trail, 2011 and Kim et al. 2011) the following five factors can help to understand the value of relationship quality of sport consumer behavior. As the study aims to reveal the dimensions of relationship quality in order to understand the sport consumer-sport club relationship quality and understand the influences on sport consumers' behavior, the results showed that the constructs about relationship quality could be conceptualized and measured as a three-dimensional construct comprising commitment, self-connection and intimacy, relationship satisfaction.

Commitment

Commitment generally defined as an exchange partner believing that an ongoing relationship with another is so important to warrant maximum efforts at maintaining it (Morgan and Hunt, 1999; Kim, 2008). Commitment has been the most commonly accepted component of relationship quality (Dwyer, et al., 1987). Morgan and Hunt (1994) emphasized that commitment had a positive influence on acquiescence and cooperative behavior, but commitment had a negative influence on propensity to leave. Many researchers put forth that strong commitment results in improvement of sales, market share, and profits (Doney and Cannon, 1997; Reynolds and Beatty, 1999). Also, commitment has been highlighted as a key construct to explain the nature of the relationship between sport club and its fans and it plays an important role in consumption decision (Funk and James, 2001; Funk and Pritchard, 2006).

Self-Connection and Intimacy

Self-connection has been frequently recognized as an essential indicator of relationship quality (Smit et al., 2007; Kim, 2009). High levels of self-connection encourage customers to stay in the relationship when they face negative situations (Lydon and Zanna, 1990) because of the protective feelings of uniqueness and dependency that help customers to have good relationships could be activated by a strong self-connection (Drigotas and Rusbult, 1992). Self-connection with a brand is parallel with team identification. Team identification has been widely considered as an important construct to keep the fundamentals of the relationship between sport club and sport fans (Fink et al., 2002; Trail et al., 2005). Many researchers outlined that team identification influence expectancies for event experiences and outcomes, intention to attend games and direct attendance (Trail et al., 2003; Matsuoka et al., 2003; Laverie and Arnett, 2000).

Intimacy one of the revealed factors of the study is identified as a fundamental component of relationship quality (Barnes, 1997; Smit et al., 2007). It has been defined as the degree of familiarity, closeness and openness to relationship partners. Fournier (1998) stated that a successful brand relationship could not be reached without establishing strong intimacy. The concept of intimacy has been admitted as a very important element for building a good relationship with sport customers (Harris and Ogbonna, 2008; McDonald and Milne, 1997).

Relationship Satisfaction

Affective or emotional state toward the relationship with a brand of customers' can be defined as relationship satisfaction (Garbarino and Johnson, 1999; Odekerken-Schoröer et al., 2003; Palmatier et al., 2006; Roberts et al., 2003). Relationship satisfaction is highly critical element for customer loyalty and profitability. Increased relationship satisfaction can lead customers to be more loyal that is one of the most important asset for companies' profitability (Zeithaml, 2000). Customer relationship management as a combination of people, processes and technologies is the key manifest of building and maintaining relationship satisfaction (Catalán-Matamoros, 2012). Developing deeper and more satisfied relationship with customers' requires exact and appropriate implementation of customer relationship management strategies (Constantinescu, 2016: 97) so that customers can feel more integrated with brand, sport club or athlete.

METHODS

As a data collecting tool questionnaire technique is used. The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part comprised of 19 scale items related to relationship quality. The scale items were taken

from Kim and Trail (2011) which was adapted to Turkish by Kose (2014) to measure relationship quality between basketball clubs and fans. All items were measured via 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The second section of the questionnaire was designed to collect demographic features of respondents. Questionnaires were distributed and answered at Anadolu University Basketball Facility by basketball fans on a game-day. Three surveyors distributed a self-administrated and research-aided questionnaire. Respondents answered the questionnaires in the researchers' presence. In lower educational groups and for groups of respondents who needed further explanations in filling out the questionnaires, researchers helped the respondents who needed further explanations in filling out the questionnaires; researchers helped the respondents fill out the form to a greater degree than they did for respondents' with higher educational levels. The surveyors first briefly explained the research purpose, and then gave the questionnaires to willing participants. The time to explain the study and complete the questionnaire was approximately 10 minutes.

250 questionnaires were collected by convenience sampling method in this study. Out of 250 distributed questionnaires, 201 usable responses were received, which translate to 80.4 percent response rate. 33 were voided because of incomplete data, while the rest were not returned by the respondents. The population of this study was Eskisehir Basket Basketball Club fans that attend their clubs' games at the club's facility.

For the analysis of the data, the questionnaire was used as the data collection method; SPSS 21.0 was used in the analysis of the data. Frequency, percentage, standard deviation and mean values were used to describe whole data. In order to evaluate and transform the data set in terms of meaningful factors, factor analysis (Principal Component Factor Analysis) was applied.

RESULTS

Demographically, out of 201 participants males are 151 individuals (75,1 %), and females are 50 individuals (24,9 %). Most of the participants (56,2 %) are younger than 26 years, and nearly half of the participants (99 individuals – 49,3 %) are students. Thus, 121 participants (60,2 %) have bachelor's degree. 54,7 % of participants have less than 1500₺, 31,3 % of it have between 1501-3000₺ and 13,9 % of participants have more than 3001₺ for monthly income. 162 participant (80,6 %) spends less than 100₺, and 39 participant spends more than 101₺ for their favorite team in a month. Also, out of 201 participants 70,1 % (141 individuals) participate 7 or less games in a regular season (See Table 1).

Table 1. Demographics of Respondents

	Frequency	%		Frequency	%
Gender			Educational Status		
Male	151	75,1	High School	52	25,9
Female	50	24,9	Bachelor's Degree	121	60,2
			Postgraduate	28	13,9
Occupation			Age		
Student	99	49,3	25 and <	113	56,2
Employee	57	28,4	26-35	43	21,4
Other	33	22,4	36 and >	45	22,4
Average Household Income*			Expenses for Team		
1500□ and <	110	54,7	100□ and <	162	80,6
1501-3000□	63	31,3	101□ and >	39	19,4
3001□ and >	28	13,9			
Participation to Games					
1-3 times/season	87	43,3			
4-7 times/season	54	26,9			
8-11 times/season	30	14,9			
12 and >	30	14,9			

n = 201

*□: Turkish Lira

In this study, Soccer clubs-Soccer fans Relationship Quality Scale which was revised and translate into Turkish by Kose (2014) and has seven dimensions (self-connection and intimacy, love, customization, relationship satisfaction, trust and commitment) was used. To adapt this 7-dimensional construct to basketball clubs and basketball fans confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted. Based on CFA results, it was revealed that 4-dimensional construct is not appropriate for basketball branch. Therefore, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted to determine new factor construct for relationship quality between basketball clubs and their fans. According to the principal axis analysis, three factors had an Eigenvalue equal to or greater than 1.0 (Kaiser, 1960), explaining a total of 68.659 percent of the variance, and factors termed 1) commitment, 2) self-connection and intimacy, 3) relationship satisfaction. One item (I love my team) removed from the study because of low factor loading (0.38). Based on exploratory factor analysis results (EFA), 18 items of relationship quality were then subjected to a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), using SPSS AMOS 21. After CFA, items got cut-off value lower then 0.60 (Meehl, 1990; Chin, 1998) removed from study. Also, there were some modifications that will contribute Chi-square/df value and take place in same factor construct. For the model of relationship quality between basketball clubs and their fans fit statistics constituted a meaningful construct. Relying on GFI, AGFI, CFI, IFI, NFI, NNFI, SRMR, and RMSEA statistics 3-dimensional construct has acceptable values for model fit (See Table 2).

Table 2. Constructs and Items of Relationship Quality

Variables	Factor Loadings	CR	AVE
<i>Commitment (7 items)</i>			
I can count on my team	,680		
I trust my team	,618		
My team is reliable	,674	,906	,582
I am committed to my team	,812		
I am emotionally attached to my team	,852		
I am passionate about my team	,857		
I adore my team	,809		
<i>Self-Connection and Intimacy (5 items)</i>			
I am very close to my team	,811		
My team and I have a lot in common	,874	,896	,635
My team is a part of me	,834		
My team's image and my self-image are similar	,767		
I am very familiar with my team	,686		
<i>Relationship Satisfaction (5 items)</i>			
I am satisfied with my relationship with my team	,826		
My team cares my ideas	,801	,888	,614
I am pleased with the relationship that I have with my team	,814		
My team pays me attention for my expenses	,771		
My team makes me feel that i am special	,698		
Total Scale Reliability		,949	

Fit Indices: χ^2/df : 2.173, GFI: 0.88, AGFI: 0.83, NFI: 0.91, NNFI: 0.93, CFI: 0.95, RMR: 0.06, SRMR: 0.05, RMSEA: 0.077

After conducting CFA to establish the measurement model, it can be said that all constructs had higher composite reliability (CR) value than recommended level of 0,70 (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994; Hair et al., 2009). Besides, average variance extracted (AVE) value helps to determine convergent validity as CR value and recommended level for AVE is 0,50 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). All constructs in this study had greater AVE value then recommended. Briefly, it can be said all variables are supporting the 3-dimensional construct.

DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION

The current study aimed to put forth the relationship quality dimensions between basketball club and basketball fans. Based on previous researches on relationship quality between sport clubs and fans (Kim and Trail, 2011 and Kose, 2014) relationship quality could be conceptualized and measured in five dimensions including trust, commitment, intimacy, self-connection, reciprocity, love and customization. The present study results showed that relationship quality dimensions between basketball club and fans could be measured in three dimensions including commitment, self-connection and intimacy, relationship satisfaction. Thus, this study provided a different aspect then existing ones despite it was applied in the same country as Kose (2014)'s study. The results showed

that even different samples (football and basketball) in same country could have different expectations from their sport clubs with their relationship. It is obvious that basketball and football fans have different types of relationship perception so that this study found out a new structure to explain relationship quality dimensions between basketball clubs and their fans. Briefly, this study revealed different conclusions comparing with Kose (2014)'s study and provided different aspect to understand the dimension of relationship quality in basketball branch.

Like in all industries, in sport industry satisfaction of customers should be guaranteed in order to keep and make them register or buy the services or the products presented by sport organization. In this manner relationship quality between two parties (fans and the club) is very important as it is indicated in many studies (Hennig-Thurau and Klee, 1997; Park et al., 2002). In parallel with researches (Kim et al., 2009; Kim and Trail, 2011) relationship quality dimensions have positive effects on satisfaction and recommendation behavior. So, sport clubs should first understand wants and needs of their fans and also the dimensions of relationship quality dimensions in order to serve their fans better to keep them and improve their loyalty. Because identifying and understanding relationship quality dimensions and predicting their effects on sport fans consumption behavior is a key consideration for sport club managers and marketers when designing a marketing strategy. Recognizing the importance of fan commitment to the club and to develop strategies to enforce the bonds between both parties will provide some useful insights for managerial applications in sport.

The current study focused on a limited number of number of basketball fans and was limited to those who attend to watch their team's games in a single sport facility in Eskisehir, Turkey. Thus, the results may not represent the whole population in Turkey. Despite questionnaires applied in the study are appropriate for the region, different responds may be observed in different regions. Also, the questionnaires can be applied on different sport branches and their fans.

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