

Fan Loyalty Continuum and Its Impact on Consumer Commitment in Sports.

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the fan loyalty continuum in sports and its impact on consumer commitment, examining how fans progress from casual engagement to committed advocacy. With the globalization, commercialization, and digital transformation of sports, fans are no longer passive spectators but active participants who sustain both the economic and symbolic value of sports organizations. The conceptual framework integrates influencing factors, stages of loyalty, and consumer commitment outcomes, drawing on Social Identity Theory, Attachment Theory, and Relationship Marketing Theory. Findings suggest that casual fans develop emotional and behavioral connections through engagement opportunities, while committed fans demonstrate resilience, consistent support, and active participation in fan communities. Loyal advocates, representing the pinnacle of the continuum, influence others, generate word-of-mouth promotion, and strengthen organizational visibility. Understanding this continuum provides sports organizations with actionable insights for targeted retention strategies, engagement initiatives, and community-building efforts. The framework also offers a foundation for future empirical research to measure fan loyalty and advocacy systematically.

Keywords: Fan loyalty, Consumer commitment, Sports management, Sports Psychology, Social identity, Relationship marketing, Fan advocacy, Sports engagement



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INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary landscape of sports, the notion of fan loyalty has emerged as one of the most significant determinants of organizational success, sustainability, and cultural impact. Unlike conventional consumer markets, where product switching is common and consumer preferences can shift rapidly, the world of sports demonstrates a unique phenomenon in which individuals forge deep, enduring attachments to teams, athletes, and even sporting traditions. Fan loyalty in sports is not merely a transactional preference for a brand or product; rather, it is a complex interplay of psychological identification, emotional connection, social belonging, and behavioural consistency (Samra, B., & Wos, A. 2014). For many fans, supporting a sports team is not a passive activity but an integral part of identity construction and community participation. This makes fan loyalty a subject of profound importance in both academic scholarship and practical sports management.

Fan loyalty, at its core, can be defined as the degree of attachment, commitment, and support that a fan demonstrates toward a sports entity, be it a team, athlete, or sporting organization, over an extended period (Bauer, H. & Stokburger et.al; 2008). Unlike generic customer loyalty, which can be explained largely through satisfaction with product quality or service, fan loyalty often endures despite negative experiences, such as poor team performance, controversies, or managerial shortcomings. This resilience distinguishes fan loyalty as a particularly compelling area of study. For instance, in many regions of the world, fans continue to support their teams across generations, creating a multigenerational loyalty that transcends immediate outcomes. This suggests that fan loyalty is not solely a reflection of consumer rationality but also a cultural, emotional, and social construct (Samra, B., & Wos, A. 2014). Scholars in sports management have increasingly emphasized that fan loyalty must be studied as a continuum where individuals progress through stages of awareness, emotional attachment, and behavioural

commitment rather than a static category of “loyal” versus “not loyal.”

The importance of loyalty in sports marketing lies in its ability to drive sustained consumer engagement and revenue generation. In the highly competitive sports industry, where leagues, clubs, and athletes constantly compete for attention and resources, loyal fans provide a steady foundation of financial and cultural support. They purchase tickets, subscribe to media platforms, invest in merchandise, and often act as brand advocates in their communities. This advocacy not only enhances the reputation of sports organizations but also strengthens the bond between the consumer and the entity. Unlike casual spectators who may consume sports sporadically, loyal fans consistently engage with their teams, creating predictable streams of revenue that allow organizations to strategize long-term (Antonakakis, C. E. (2025).

Beyond its financial implications, loyalty serves as a central pillar of fan engagement, which is increasingly viewed as the lifeblood of sports management. Engagement encompasses both the emotional and interactive dimensions of fandom. It is reflected not only in attendance at games or purchasing behaviour but also in how fans connect with the narratives, symbols, and values associated with their favourite teams. In this sense, loyalty creates a feedback loop: the more emotionally invested a fan is, the more likely they are to engage, and the more they engage, the deeper their loyalty becomes. The interplay between engagement and loyalty is particularly evident in the digital era, where fans have unprecedented access to behind-the-scenes content, direct communication with athletes, and immersive experiences through virtual platforms.

Closely related to loyalty is the concept of consumer commitment, which can be understood as the extent to which fans are willing to maintain their relationship with a sports entity over time, often in the face of competing alternatives or negative circumstances. Consumer commitment is not merely a passive expression of preference but an active demonstration of perseverance, sacrifice, and alignment with the values of the sports brand. Scholars often distinguish between attitudinal commitment and behavioral commitment. Attitudinal commitment refers to the psychological and emotional dimensions of fan dedication, such as identifying strongly with a team’s culture, history, or ethos. Behavioural commitment, on the other hand, manifests in tangible actions such as attending games regularly, renewing memberships, or traveling long distances to watch teams play. The relationship between loyalty and commitment is symbiotic: loyalty forms the foundation of attachment, while commitment represents the depth of this attachment in real-world actions.

In practical terms, consumer commitment can be seen as the outcome of loyalty. When a fan progresses along the loyalty continuum beginning from casual awareness of a team, developing affective attachment, and culminating in conative and action loyalty commitment becomes

evident. This commitment is vital to the survival of sports organizations because it ensures continuity in consumer behavior even during periods of poor performance. For example, fans of historically underperforming teams may still fill stadiums and purchase merchandise, demonstrating that their commitment is rooted not solely in success but in identity and emotional investment. From a managerial perspective, this reveals why consumer commitment is a more powerful predictor of long-term organizational stability than short-term fan interest.

The study of fan loyalty and consumer commitment also raises critical questions about how these phenomena can be measured, managed, and enhanced in a rapidly changing sports environment. Globalization has broadened the fan base of many teams beyond local communities, creating both opportunities and challenges. While international fans may contribute significantly to revenue through merchandise sales and media subscriptions, their loyalty may lack the cultural depth of local supporters. Similarly, the rise of digital platforms has created new avenues for engagement but has also fragmented attention across multiple entertainment options. Younger generations, in particular, are less likely to exhibit traditional patterns of loyalty, instead favouring personalized experiences and shorter-term affiliations. These shifts demand fresh insights into how loyalty can be cultivated and transformed into consumer commitment in diverse contexts.

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to examine the fan loyalty continuum in sports and its impact on consumer commitment. By conceptualizing loyalty as a progression stages, the study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how fans evolve in their relationship with sports entities. It also aims to demonstrate how this progression influences the nature and depth of consumer commitment, thereby offering both theoretical and practical contributions to the field of sports management.

The guiding research questions for this study are as follows:

1. *How can fan loyalty in sports be defined and conceptualized as a continuum?*
2. *In what ways does progression along the loyalty continuum translate into attitudinal and behavioural commitment?*

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Fan loyalty has long been a central theme in sports management research, viewed as a multidimensional construct shaped by psychological, social, and behavioral factors. Early studies primarily defined loyalty as repeat behavior or purchase intention (Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978). Later research emphasized the attitudinal aspects of loyalty, suggesting that fans develop strong psychological attachments to teams or athletes that go beyond transactional interactions (Dick & Basu, 1994). Within sports, loyalty is often fueled by

passion, identity, and cultural belonging rather than rational decision-making alone (Funk & James, 2001).

Fan loyalty is more than repeated attendance or consumption; it involves emotional and psychological attachment to a team, club, or athlete. Funk and James (2001) proposed the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM), which describes a progression from awareness to allegiance. According to this model, individuals initially become aware of a team, develop attraction and involvement, and eventually reach full allegiance, marked by emotional commitment and behavioral consistency. The model emphasizes that loyalty is a developmental process, strengthened over time through repeated positive experiences, identification with the team, and social reinforcement.

The Consumer-Based Loyalty model further differentiates loyalty into cognitive and affective components. Cognitive loyalty involves rational evaluations of team performance, value, or experience, while affective loyalty captures emotional attachment and identity-based connections. Fans with high affective loyalty are more likely to engage in advocacy behaviors, promoting the team within social networks, attending games consistently, and purchasing merchandise regardless of performance outcomes (Bauer, Stokburger-Sauer, & Exler, 2008).

Building on Oliver's (1999) loyalty model, loyalty can be conceptualized as a continuum comprising four stages. The cognitive stage reflects rational awareness of a team or sport, based on information such as performance or reputation. The affective stage involves emotional connections that bind fans to teams through joy, pride, or nostalgia (Funk & James, 2006). The conative stage represents intention-driven behavior, where fans actively plan to attend matches or support a club despite obstacles. Finally, the action stage reflects actual behavioral commitment, such as purchasing season tickets, subscribing to digital platforms, or traveling for games (Bee & Kahle, 2006). These stages provide a structured framework to examine the depth of fan-team relationships.

Consumer commitment in sports is generally conceptualized in two forms: attitudinal commitment and behavioral commitment (Mahony et al., 2000). Attitudinal commitment captures psychological attachment, trust, and identification with the sports entity, while behavioral commitment reflects tangible actions, such as attendance, merchandise purchases, or social media engagement (Filo et al., 2008). Research indicates that highly committed fans are more resilient to poor team performance and less likely to switch allegiances (Bodet & Bernache-Assollant, 2011). Consequently, consumer commitment is critical for both financial stability and cultural significance in sports organizations.

Several studies highlight factors influencing progression along the loyalty continuum. Team performance plays a key role in the early cognitive stage, but social identity and emotional attachment sustain loyalty in later stages (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Other determinants include community belonging, peer influence, digital media interactions, and athlete charisma (Trail & James, 2001). With the rise of online platforms, virtual communities also strengthen affective and conative loyalty by enabling constant engagement with sports entities (Popp & Woratschek, 2017).

Sports organizations recognize loyalty as a strategic tool for long-term sustainability. Loyal fans contribute disproportionately to revenue through repeat purchases and word-of-mouth promotion (Yoshida et al., 2014). By leveraging loyalty programs, membership clubs, and interactive fan engagement strategies, organizations can guide fans from cognitive awareness to behavioral commitment. Conceptualizing loyalty as a continuum allows managers to design targeted interventions at each stage, optimizing fan experiences and organizational performance.

Despite extensive research, few studies integrate loyalty and commitment into a single dynamic model. Much of the existing literature treats loyalty as a binary variable (loyal vs. disloyal), overlooking the complexity of fan behavior in contemporary sports markets. Cross-cultural studies are also limited, although fan loyalty manifests differently across regions and sports traditions (Biscaia et al., 2013). This highlights the need for comprehensive frameworks such as the fan loyalty continuum that bridge theory and managerial practice while accounting for evolving fan experiences in digital and global contexts.

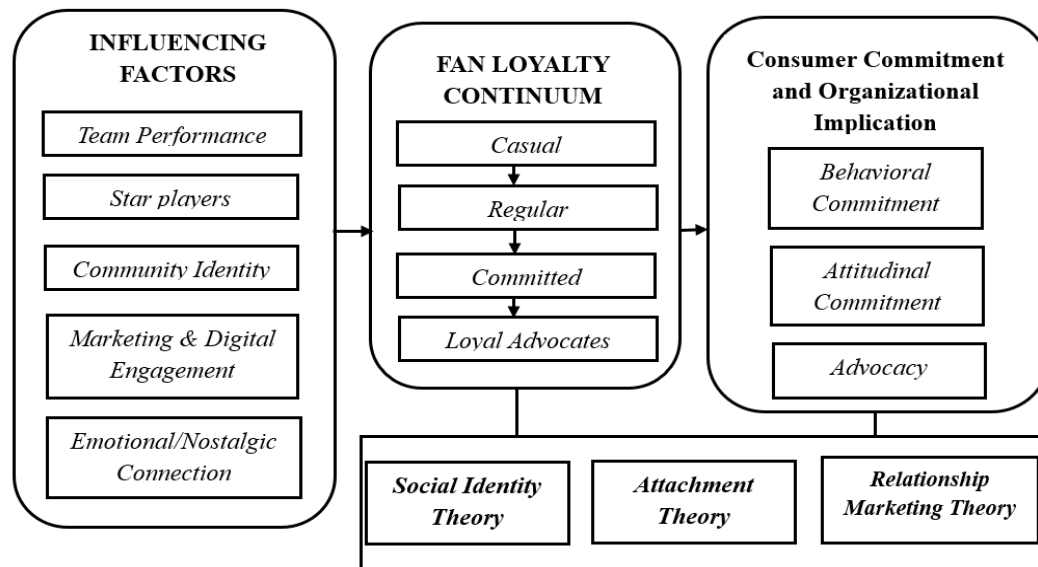
METHODOLOGY

This study employs a conceptual research design grounded in secondary data analysis to examine the fan loyalty continuum and its impact on consumer commitment in sports. Data were drawn from peer-reviewed journals, industry reports, case studies, and reputable online sources to identify key drivers of fan loyalty and patterns of engagement. The analysis synthesizes perspectives from Social Identity Theory, Attachment Theory, and Relationship Marketing Theory to construct an integrated conceptual framework.

This approach provides a systematic understanding of fan loyalty without relying on primary data collection, offering theoretical insights and managerial implications. However, limitations include dependence on secondary sources and the absence of empirical validation. Future research is encouraged to test the proposed framework through quantitative or qualitative methods.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 Fan Loyalty Continuum and its Impact on Consumer Commitment in Sports



Fan loyalty has become a central focus in sports management research, shaped by the globalization of sports, increasing commercialization, and the rise of digital engagement. Fans are no longer passive spectators; instead, they form an active community of consumers, advocates, and cultural participants, sustaining both the economic and symbolic value of sports. The conceptual framework presented in the diagram above addresses the gap by proposing a structured model that integrates influencing factors, stages of loyalty, and consumer commitment outcomes. It builds upon established theories such as Social Identity Theory, Attachment Theory, and Relationship Marketing Theory to provide a comprehensive explanation of how fans progress from casual engagement to loyal advocacy.

The framework is structured in three main components. First, it identifies the influencing factors that trigger and shape fan engagement, ranging from team performance and star players to community identity, marketing strategies, and emotional or nostalgic connections. These factors act as stimuli that initiate and sustain fan interest. Second, the framework outlines the fan loyalty continuum, a stepwise progression that moves from casual fans to regular followers, then to committed supporters, and ultimately to loyal advocates. This continuum represents the dynamic and evolving nature of fan identity and involvement over time. Finally, the framework demonstrates how loyalty translates into consumer commitment and organizational implications, manifesting in behavioral commitment, attitudinal commitment, and advocacy. Together, these three layers form a holistic structure that links external influences to internal psychological processes and organizational outcomes.

This conceptualization serves multiple purposes. From an academic perspective, it enriches the literature by connecting theories of identity, attachment, and

marketing with the lived realities of sports fans. From a managerial perspective, it provides practical insights for sports organizations, suggesting pathways through which they can cultivate enduring loyalty and secure long-term sustainability. The remainder of this discussion examines the framework in detail, beginning with the factors that influence fan engagement.

Influencing Factors

The first stage of the conceptual framework emphasizes the antecedents of fan loyalty the factors that create the conditions under which fans develop attachments to teams or sports organizations. These influences are multidimensional, encompassing performance-related elements, individual player charisma, communal belonging, strategic marketing, and emotional or nostalgic associations. Each factor operates independently but also interacts with the others, producing a complex environment that shapes the trajectory of fan loyalty.

1. Team Performance: Performance remains one of the most visible and immediate influences on fan loyalty. Teams that consistently perform well tend to attract larger audiences, increase ticket sales, and maintain higher levels of media coverage. Success on the field provides fans with a sense of pride and validation, reinforcing their identification with the team. However, performance-based loyalty is often fragile. Fans whose attachment rests solely on success may withdraw their support during losing seasons, leading to a fluctuating base of casual followers. Yet, even in underperforming teams, performance can create memorable moments that build long-lasting emotional bonds. For example, a single iconic victory or a historic underdog achievement may embed itself in the collective memory of fans, sustaining loyalty beyond short-term performance metrics. Thus, while performance is crucial, it is not sufficient in isolation; it must interact with other factors to nurture deeper, more enduring loyalty.

2. *Star Players:* Star players serve as powerful symbols of fan loyalty, often transcending the team itself. Charismatic athletes with exceptional skill, media appeal, and personal narratives act as role models and aspirational figures. Fans are drawn to their individuality, whether it is their technical prowess, resilience in adversity, or off-field persona. The presence of such players often catalyzes fan engagement by humanizing the sport and creating identifiable figures around whom narratives can be built. For younger fans in particular, star players function as points of entry into fandom. However, reliance on individual players can also present challenges. Transfers, retirements, or controversies involving star players may weaken fan loyalty if not supported by broader communal or institutional ties. Therefore, while star players ignite initial enthusiasm, sports organizations must ensure that these individual connections are embedded within a larger cultural and organizational identity.

3. *Community Identity:* Sports are deeply rooted in social and cultural contexts, making community identity one of the strongest and most enduring influences on fan loyalty. Teams often serve as representations of a region, city, or cultural group, creating a shared identity that extends beyond athletic performance. Fans see the team as an embodiment of their collective values, struggles, and aspirations. Supporting a team becomes synonymous with belonging to a community, and victories are celebrated as communal achievements rather than individual triumphs. Community identity fosters loyalty that is resistant to short-term fluctuations in performance because it is anchored in cultural meaning rather than immediate success. For instance, local derbies or regional competitions often ignite loyalty based on cultural pride rather than the pursuit of trophies. In this sense, community identity transforms sports organizations into social institutions, binding fans together through shared traditions, rituals, and narratives.

4. *Marketing and Digital Engagement:* In the contemporary era, digital media has revolutionized the ways in which fans connect with teams. Marketing strategies that integrate digital platforms, interactive content, and personalized experiences have become central to cultivating loyalty. Digital engagement allows fans to interact with teams beyond the stadium, creating a 24/7 relationship that transcends physical boundaries. Social media platforms, online fan communities, and mobile applications enable fans to express their identities, share experiences, and stay connected to the team's daily life. Effective marketing also amplifies emotional connections by telling stories, celebrating milestones, and engaging fans in decision-making processes such as merchandise design or event participation. Importantly, digital engagement democratizes fandom by giving global audiences access to teams, thus expanding the fan base beyond traditional geographic limits. However, digital engagement must be authentic and interactive; superficial campaigns often fail to build lasting loyalty. Instead, strategies that emphasize dialogue, recognition, and community-

building strengthen the progression along the loyalty continuum.

5. *Emotional and Nostalgic Connection:* Perhaps the most profound and enduring influence on fan loyalty is the emotional and nostalgic connection that fans develop with their teams. Sports are rich in symbols, memories, and rituals that evoke deep emotional responses. Nostalgia- whether it is the memory of attending a first game with a parent, the sound of a team anthem, or the recollection of a historic victory anchors fans in a personal and collective history. These emotional ties often outlast changes in performance, management, or player rosters. For many fans, loyalty is less about the present performance and more about the memories and meanings accumulated over time. Emotional connections also explain why some fans remain committed despite adversity, poor performance, or scandals. The team becomes intertwined with their personal narrative and sense of identity. From a managerial perspective, recognizing and nurturing these emotional connections through storytelling, rituals, and heritage promotion is crucial for transforming casual fans into lifelong advocates.

TRANSITION TO THE FAN LOYALTY CONTINUUM

Taken together, these influencing factors create the conditions under which fans begin their journey along the loyalty continuum. While performance or star players may initially attract attention, deeper factors such as community identity and emotional connections sustain long-term loyalty. Marketing and digital engagement serve as a bridge, facilitating interaction and reinforcing bonds. Thus, the influencing factors should not be viewed in isolation but as interdependent elements that shape the trajectory of fan loyalty. The next stage of the framework which is the fan loyalty continuum illustrates how fans evolve through progressive levels of attachment, moving from casual interest to loyal advocacy.

The centre piece of the conceptual framework is the fan loyalty continuum, which maps the gradual evolution of fans from casual spectators to loyal advocates. Loyalty in sports is rarely static; it develops, deepens, and sometimes regresses depending on circumstances and experiences. The continuum provides a structured way of understanding this process by breaking it down into four primary stages: casual fans, regular fans, committed fans, and loyal advocates. Each stage is characterized by distinct behavioral patterns, emotional connections, and levels of identification with the team. Importantly, the continuum is not simply a linear progression but a dynamic pathway, where fans may move forward, stagnate, or even regress depending on external influences and personal circumstances.

➤ ***Casual Fans:*** Casual fans are the entry point of the loyalty continuum, characterized by low engagement and support driven by convenience, social context, or temporary interest rather than deep attachment. They may watch games because friends or family are

watching or because of high-profile matches, and their identification with the team is limited and inconsistent. Casual fans are highly sensitive to factors like team performance or media coverage, contributing sporadically through occasional ticket purchases, viewing broadcasts, or light digital engagement. Despite their modest immediate impact, they represent the largest potential fan base. Targeted marketing, engaging match-day experiences, and storytelling can convert casual fans into more committed supporters, making them a crucial focus for long-term fan development.

➤ **Regular Fans:** Regular fans occupy the next stage of the continuum, showing greater consistency and identification than casual fans. They follow most games, purchase merchandise more frequently, and actively engage in online fan communities. Their connection to the team is stronger, though still influenced by performance or individual players. Support becomes a routine part of their recreational life, with fans expressing their identity through conversations, apparel, and opinions. Attachment at this stage is both behavioral and attitudinal, though not yet deeply emotional. Regular fans provide a stable revenue stream and help create a visible atmosphere of support in stadiums and online. Organizations can strengthen their loyalty by fostering a sense of belonging through community-focused and emotionally engaging strategies.

➤ **Committed Fans:** Committed fans exhibit a deeper level of loyalty, characterized by strong emotional identification and consistent behavioral support. The team becomes part of their identity, and supporting it is a meaningful aspect of their lifestyle. They follow matches diligently, remain resilient during losses, and participate in fan communities and rituals. Behaviourally, they are reliable contributors as they are attending games, buying season tickets and merchandise, and engaging with content across platforms. Emotional and nostalgic connections, such as family traditions or community engagement, often strengthen their commitment. Committed fans are less dependent on short-term performance and provide organizations with stability and resilience. Retention strategies focus on recognition, inclusion in team narratives, and opportunities for deeper engagement, such as exclusive content, loyalty programs, or direct interactions with players and management.

➤ **Loyal Advocates:** The highest stage of the continuum is occupied by loyal advocates, who demonstrate peak commitment through consistent loyalty and active promotion of the team. They identify deeply with the team, integrating it into their personal identity, and go beyond attendance or merchandise to recommend the team, defend it, and create fan-driven content. Loyal advocates often lead fan communities, organize events, sustain traditions, and inspire new fans. Their attachment is highly emotional, enduring, and resilient to poor performance or controversies, sometimes even strengthening during adversity. From a managerial perspective, they are the most valuable segment,

contributing financially and amplifying the brand through word-of-mouth and grassroots promotion. Organizations can engage loyal advocates by recognizing their efforts, offering co-creation opportunities, and incorporating their voices into decision-making.

Dynamics of Progression Along the Continuum

The fan loyalty continuum is not a rigid pathway but a dynamic and fluid process. Fans may progress, stagnate, or regress depending on personal circumstances, organizational strategies, and external influences. For instance, a casual fan drawn in by a star player may evolve into a committed fan if they find a strong community identity and emotional connection. Conversely, a regular fan may regress to casual engagement if the team experiences prolonged underperformance or if personal interests shift.

The influencing factors discussed earlier interact continuously with the continuum. Performance may draw in casual fans, but emotional connections sustain committed and loyal advocates. Marketing strategies may spark initial engagement, but community identity anchors long-term loyalty. Thus, the continuum is best understood as a journey shaped by a constellation of influences, where the task of sports organizations is to facilitate upward progression and prevent regression.

The Strategic Importance of the Continuum

Understanding the fan loyalty continuum is crucial for sports organizations because it provides a map for strategic fan management. Each stage requires tailored strategies:

- For casual fans, the focus should be on visibility, accessibility, and entry-level engagement.
- For regular fans, organizations must provide consistent experiences and opportunities to reinforce routine support.
- For committed fans, recognition and inclusion in community-building initiatives are key.
- For loyal advocates, opportunities for advocacy, leadership, and co-creation sustain their role as ambassadors of the team.

Transition To Consumer Commitment and Organizational Implications

The third pillar of the conceptual framework highlights the outcomes of fan loyalty specifically, how progression along the loyalty continuum translates into forms of consumer commitment that hold significant implications for sports organizations. In marketing and management literature, commitment is broadly understood as the willingness of consumers to maintain a relationship with a brand, organization, or product over time. In the sports context, commitment is especially powerful because it often transcends rational decision-making, manifesting in highly emotional, symbolic, and enduring forms of support.

The framework identifies three primary dimensions of consumer commitment: *behavioural commitment*, *attitudinal commitment*, and *advocacy*. These

dimensions are interconnected and cumulative, representing the ways in which fan loyalty contributes not only to the financial stability of sports organizations but also to their cultural visibility, brand strength, and long-term sustainability.

1. Behavioural Commitment

Behavioural commitment refers to fans' consistent, observable actions in support of their teams, including attending games, purchasing tickets and merchandise, consuming media broadcasts, and engaging on digital platforms. It is the most directly measurable and financially significant form of loyalty. Fans at different stages of the loyalty continuum demonstrate varying levels of behavioural commitment: casual fans contribute sporadically, regular fans show more consistent engagement, and committed fans and loyal advocates exhibit sustained, predictable support, often prioritizing team activities over other leisure options. Beyond direct revenue, behavioural commitment generates secondary benefits, such as enhancing stadium atmospheres, increasing team visibility through merchandise, and expanding digital reach, making it a crucial dimension of consumer loyalty.

2. Attitudinal Commitment

While behavioral commitment reflects visible actions, attitudinal commitment captures fans' psychological and emotional attachment to their teams. It represents internalized loyalty that sustains long-term support, integrating the team into fans' identity, values, and emotions. Fans with strong attitudinal commitment experience victories and defeats personally, often grounded in community identity, nostalgia, or emotional connections. Unlike casual or performance-dependent fans, they remain loyal during poor performance, viewing their support as a matter of principle or pride. High attitudinal commitment reduces the likelihood of switching allegiance, enhancing both customer lifetime value and long-term stability. For sports organizations, fostering attitudinal commitment is essential, as it ensures fans remain psychologically invested and ready to re-engage, providing a foundation for enduring loyalty and organizational sustainability.

3. Advocacy

Advocacy represents the highest expression of consumer commitment, where fans actively promote the team beyond personal support. Loyal advocates generate word-of-mouth promotion, defend the team, and participate in initiatives that expand the fan base, providing organic visibility and credibility beyond formal marketing. They contribute at multiple levels: recommending games to friends, organizing community events, leading supporter groups, and creating content in digital spaces. Advocacy leverages social influence, as people are more likely to follow peer recommendations than advertisements. It strengthens fan recruitment, brand image, and resilience during crises, with advocates often defending the team during scandals or poor performance. Advocacy also reinforces loyalty, as the act of promoting the team deepens identification and commitment, creating a reciprocal cycle that benefits both fans and organizations.

Organizational Implications of Consumer Commitment

The transition of fan loyalty into consumer commitment carries profound implications for sports organizations. First and foremost, it ensures financial sustainability. Behavioural commitment produces predictable revenue through tickets, merchandise, and digital subscriptions. Attitudinal commitment reduces churn and enhances customer lifetime value, while advocacy generates organic growth without proportional increases in marketing expenditure.

Second, consumer commitment strengthens brand equity. Fans with high levels of attitudinal commitment and advocacy transform the team from a commercial entity into a cultural symbol. This symbolic value enhances the team's attractiveness to sponsors, investors, and partners, thereby expanding commercial opportunities. Moreover, the emotional bonds cultivated through commitment create resilience against reputational risks, as loyal advocates often rally in defense of the organization during crises.

Third, consumer commitment supports strategic adaptability. In a rapidly changing sports environment marked by technological disruption, shifting media landscapes, and evolving consumer expectations, organizations that enjoy strong fan commitment are better positioned to experiment with new formats and innovations. Fans who are deeply committed are more likely to embrace changes, such as new digital platforms, rebranded merchandise, or expanded competitions. This adaptability provides organizations with the flexibility needed to remain competitive in an evolving industry.

Finally, consumer commitment contributes to social and cultural impact. Sports organizations with highly committed fan bases often transcend their role as entertainment providers, becoming social institutions that shape identity, cohesion, and collective memory. Committed fans see themselves not just as consumers but as participants in a shared culture, thereby reinforcing the team's role as a community anchor. This cultural significance enhances legitimacy and ensures that the organization maintains relevance beyond immediate commercial concerns.

LINKING COMMITMENT BACK TO THE CONTINUUM

The three dimensions of consumer commitment are not isolated outcomes but rather the culmination of progression along the fan loyalty continuum. Casual fans contribute minimally to behavioural commitment, while regular fans begin to demonstrate consistency. Committed fans display both behavioural and attitudinal commitment, while loyal advocates embody all three dimensions, including advocacy. Thus, the continuum provides a pathway through which organizations can understand and strategically manage the development of consumer commitment.

By recognizing that different stages produce distinct forms of commitment, sports organizations can tailor

strategies to maximize outcomes. For instance, casual fans may require promotional incentives to stimulate behavioral engagement, whereas committed fans may respond more positively to initiatives that strengthen attitudinal bonds. Loyal advocates, in turn, benefit from opportunities to participate in co-creation and leadership, reinforcing their role as ambassadors. This stage-specific approach ensures that the framework is not merely descriptive but also actionable.

Theoretical Foundations

No conceptual framework in sports management can stand on its own without strong theoretical underpinnings. The Fan Loyalty Continuum and its Impact on Consumer Commitment in Sports draws upon three interrelated theories that provide explanatory depth and analytical rigor: Social Identity Theory, Attachment Theory, and Relationship Marketing Theory. Each of these perspectives offers a lens through which the dynamics of fan behavior, loyalty progression, and consumer commitment can be better understood. Together, they establish a multidimensional foundation that integrates psychology, sociology, and marketing into a coherent explanation of fandom in sports.

1. Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory (SIT), introduced by Tajfel and Turner (1979), posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from their membership in social groups. People categorize themselves and others into “in-groups” and “out-groups,” and this process of categorization influences attitudes, emotions, and behaviors. In the context of sports, teams become powerful in-groups through which fans define and express their identities.

Application to Fan Loyalty

Fans who identify strongly with their team internalize its successes and failures as personal outcomes. Victories generate pride and enhanced self-esteem, while losses may create disappointment but often reinforce solidarity with fellow fans. This explains why fan loyalty is often resistant to short-term performance fluctuations; the identification transcends rational evaluation and becomes embedded in personal and group identity. For example, a lifelong supporter of a regional football club may remain loyal despite decades without a championship, because the act of support itself symbolizes belonging to a valued community.

Role in the Continuum

SIT provides critical insights into the progression along the fan loyalty continuum. Casual fans, who lack strong group identification, remain at the margins of fandom. As fans move into the regular and committed stages, identification with the in-group (the fan community and the team) intensifies. At the level of loyal advocates, identity fusion occurs, where the distinction between personal identity and group identity becomes blurred. These fans do not merely support the team; they view themselves as part of the team. This perspective explains why loyal advocates engage in advocacy, defending the team as though defending themselves.

Implications for Sports Organizations

For managers, SIT emphasizes the importance of creating and reinforcing in-group identities. Strategies such as cultivating regional pride, developing inclusive fan rituals, and promoting symbolic artifacts (e.g., team colors, chants, and traditions) strengthen identification and push fans along the continuum. Furthermore, SIT highlights the competitive dimension of fandom: rivalry with out-groups (opposing teams) can intensify loyalty to the in-group, providing additional opportunities for engagement and commitment.

2. Attachment Theory

Attachment Theory, originally developed by Bowlby (1969) to explain emotional bonds in child-caregiver relationships, has since been extended to various domains, including consumer behavior. The theory emphasizes the deep emotional connections individuals form with attachment figures, characterized by affection, security, and resilience. In sports, teams, players, and even symbolic elements (stadiums, rituals, traditions) can serve as attachment figures that fans bond with emotionally.

Application to Fan Loyalty

Attachment explains the emotional depth of fandom, especially at the committed and loyal advocate stages of the continuum. Fans often describe their connection to teams in relational terms—speaking of “love,” “devotion,” or “faithfulness.” These emotional ties endure despite adversity, much like interpersonal attachments that persist through conflict or disappointment. A fan may continue to support a team through losing seasons not because of rational evaluation but because detachment would feel like a personal loss, similar to ending a long-term relationship.

Role in the Continuum

Attachment Theory explains why fans progress from casual spectators to deeply committed supporters. Casual fans lack attachment; their interest is conditional and temporary. Regular fans begin to form bonds, particularly when reinforced by positive experiences, nostalgia, or emotional memories. Committed fans display secure attachments, experiencing joy and sorrow alongside the team. Loyal advocates represent the strongest form of attachment, where loyalty becomes unconditional and enduring, often described in terms of devotion or lifelong allegiance.

Implications for Sports Organizations

From a managerial perspective, Attachment Theory highlights the importance of cultivating emotional experiences that strengthen bonds. Creating memorable game-day atmospheres, celebrating heritage, and engaging fans in emotionally resonant storytelling all deepen attachment. Moreover, personal connections with players through interviews, behind-the-scenes access, or community involvement enhance the sense of relational closeness. Recognizing and honoring long-term fans also reinforces attachment, signaling that the relationship is reciprocal rather than transactional.

3. Relationship Marketing Theory

Relationship Marketing Theory (RMT) emerged in the late 20th century as a response to transactional marketing approaches that focused narrowly on one-time sales. RMT emphasizes building long-term, mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and consumers. In the sports industry, this approach is particularly relevant because fandom is inherently relational, extending over time and shaped by ongoing interactions.

Application to Fan Loyalty

RMT highlights the importance of continuous engagement, trust, and value creation in developing loyalty. In sports, this translates into consistent communication, personalized experiences, and recognition of fan contributions. Unlike transactional marketing, which treats fans as customers purchasing tickets or merchandise, relationship marketing views them as partners in a long-term journey. This perspective aligns seamlessly with the loyalty continuum, where progression depends not on single interactions but on the accumulation of experiences that build trust and commitment.

Role in the Continuum

RMT explains how fans move upward along the continuum through relationship-building strategies. Casual fans may be drawn in through promotional offers or digital engagement campaigns. Regular fans require consistent value delivery such as reliable communication, quality experiences, and recognition. Committed fans thrive on deeper relational exchanges, such as exclusive content, loyalty programs, and opportunities for dialogue. Loyal advocates benefit most from co-creation opportunities, where they are treated as collaborators who shape the team's identity and initiatives.

Implications for Sports Organizations

From a practical standpoint, RMT provides a roadmap for designing fan engagement strategies. Personalization is critical: tailoring messages, experiences, and opportunities to different segments of the continuum maximizes impact. Moreover, transparency and trust-building are essential, as fans expect authenticity in an era of digital connectivity. Organizations that fail to maintain relational integrity through scandals, neglect, or exploitation risk damaging long-term loyalty. Conversely, organizations that treat fans as valued partners create advocates who sustain and expand the brand organically.

Integrating the Three Theories

While each theory provides unique insights, their integration offers a comprehensive explanation of the fan loyalty continuum. Social Identity Theory explains the collective and symbolic dimensions of fandom, where teams act as in-groups that shape self-concept. Attachment Theory highlights the emotional and psychological bonds that sustain loyalty through adversity. Relationship Marketing Theory underscores

the organizational role in cultivating and maintaining these bonds through continuous engagement.

Together, these theories reveal that fan loyalty is neither purely emotional nor purely rational, but a dynamic interplay of identity, attachment, and relational exchange. Fans are drawn into fandom through identity processes, sustained through emotional bonds, and further developed through organizational strategies. This progression results in consumer commitment expressed through behavioral, attitudinal, and advocacy dimensions.

Theoretical Contributions of the Framework

The integration of these theories within the conceptual framework contributes to academic discourse in several ways:

- 1. Multidimensional Perspective:** By combining psychological, sociological, and marketing approaches, the framework avoids reductionism and acknowledges the complexity of fandom.
- 2. Process Orientation:** The continuum emphasizes progression over time, aligning with relationship marketing's focus on long-term development and attachment theory's emphasis on deepening bonds.
- 3. Actionable Insights:** Social Identity Theory and Relationship Marketing Theory together highlight strategies that reinforce identity and relationships, providing clear guidance for practitioners.
- 4. Resilience and Stability:** Attachment Theory explains why loyalty often endures beyond rational boundaries, accounting for the resilience of committed fans and loyal advocates.

Integration of the Framework

The fan loyalty continuum and its impact on consumer commitment are best understood as a dynamic, cyclical model where multiple forces converge. Rather than treating loyalty as linear, the framework integrates psychological, social, emotional, and marketing-oriented variables to explain how fans evolve from casual spectators to lifelong advocates.

At the foundation are the influencing factors. Team performance attracts casual fans, while star players often serve as identity symbols that bridge casual and committed levels. Marketing strategies and digital engagement act as amplifiers, strengthening visibility and connection. Emotional and nostalgic ties, in turn, serve as long-term anchors, protecting loyalty even during poor performance.

The fan loyalty continuum then functions as the central engine of the framework. Fans move from casual spectatorship (situational and limited) to regular engagement, then to committed identification where the team becomes part of personal identity, and finally to loyal advocacy where fans actively defend and promote the team.

Integration occurs most clearly in the feedback loop between the continuum and consumer commitment. Emotional satisfaction, nostalgia, or community identity

feeds into commitment, which in turn strengthens loyalty. Commitment- whether behavioral (buying tickets), attitudinal (positive sentiment), or advocacy-driven (community mobilization) reinforces the very factors that sustain fandom.

The theoretical underpinnings reinforce this cycle. Social Identity Theory explains how commitment becomes part of identity, enabling loyal advocates to influence communities and attract new fans. Attachment Theory shows how emotional bonds, once formed, resist change and secure loyalty despite external fluctuations. Ultimately, the integration demonstrates that fan loyalty and consumer commitment are two sides of the same coin, interconnected through influences, transitions, and reinforcing loops. This holistic perspective provides sports organizations with a roadmap not only to attract casual fans but also to nurture them into lifelong advocates.

CONCLUSION

The conceptual framework of the fan loyalty continuum provides significant insights into the dynamics of fan engagement in sports. This study highlights that fan loyalty is not static but develops along a continuum, ranging from casual observers to highly committed supporters. Key factors influencing this progression include team performance, star players, community and cultural identity, marketing strategies, and emotional or nostalgic connections. By understanding these factors, sports organizations can strategically engage fans at different stages, designing initiatives that strengthen emotional attachment, encourage behavioral commitment, and build long-term relationships with their audience. The framework demonstrates that fan loyalty is multifaceted, encompassing emotional, behavioral, and attitudinal dimensions, which collectively shape a fan's overall commitment to a club or league.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to sports management literature by integrating elements of consumer behavior and loyalty theory within a sports context. It provides a structured lens for examining how loyalty develops and offers a conceptual foundation that can be empirically tested in future research. Practically, the framework equips sports organizations with actionable strategies to manage fan relationships, develop loyalty programs, leverage digital platforms, and enhance long-term sustainability through engaged fanbases. The insights can guide marketing, community engagement, and operational strategies to ensure both financial viability and social cohesion among supporters.

However, the study has certain limitations. Since it is conceptual and based on secondary data, it lacks primary empirical validation. This limits the ability to quantify the strength of relationships between different factors and stages of the loyalty continuum. Additionally, the framework primarily considers a generalized sports context and may not fully account for the nuances of specific sports, leagues, or cultural settings. Therefore,

while the conceptual insights are valuable, empirical studies are necessary to test, refine, and validate the model across diverse contexts.

Future research could address these limitations by conducting empirical testing of the fan loyalty continuum through surveys, interviews, or longitudinal studies, examining how loyalty evolves over time. Cross-cultural studies could provide insights into how cultural, social, and economic factors influence fan behavior, offering a broader understanding of loyalty in global sports contexts. Additionally, exploring digital fan engagement, social media influence, and the role of emerging technologies in shaping loyalty can provide contemporary relevance to the framework. By addressing these research gaps, scholars and practitioners can further refine strategies for building sustainable fan loyalty, ultimately contributing to both academic knowledge and practical sports management outcomes.

Conflict of interest:

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this work. The research was conducted without any financial, personal, or professional relationships that could inappropriately influence the results or interpretation.

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