

**The Role of Involvement in the Loyalty of Sport Fans
in Professional Volleyball**

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper was to investigate the role of fan involvement with volleyball in their behavior (as expressed by loyalty) towards their team in professional men's volleyball League in Greece. The sample that was used included 521 fans that watched volleyball games in five venues in Athens and completed questionnaires that were handed to them. The questionnaires items were the Leisure Involvement Scale (5 Likert scale) which was used by Nassis and Theodorakis (2008) and, for the evaluation of fan loyalty, the questionnaire (8 Likert scale) by Theodorakis and Wann, (2008) both were used in Greek population. Correlated regression analyses were used. Results showed that volleyball fans had a high level of involvement as expressed by three factors, namely Attraction, Centrality and Self-Expression and loyalty as expressed by behaviors such as frequency of watching games/TV/radio and participating in conversations with friends revolving around sports. The correlation analysis showed a positive correlation between the involvement factors and the loyalty dimensions. Additionally, the linear regression analyses showed that the three factors of involvement predicted in different degrees a statistically significant percentage of specific indicators that express the loyalty of volleyball fans to their teams. The results can be utilized by professional teams' executives for the creation of the profile of fan involvement with volleyball, thus aiming at discovering more efficient forms of communication with them.

Keywords: fan behavior; involvement; loyalty; volleyball

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Introduction

Nowadays, the consumers of sports activities have become more demanding while market segmentation has greatly affected the preferences of fans. Survival and success for sports organizations does not depend merely on competitiveness in the sport itself. It depends on meeting fan needs in terms of improving the sporting spectacle and on competing more successfully at an international level. It also depends on adding more chances for entertainment, of proper organization and management, of marketing and sponsorships (Theodorakis, Kambitsis, Laios, & Koustelios, 2001).

Regarding the professional sports industry, three sports (soccer, basketball and volleyball) enjoy professional status in Greece. Soccer is organized in three professional national divisions, while basketball and volleyball are organized in two professional national divisions. The organization of the XVIII Olympic Games in Athens, have intensified the interest of the Greek fans regarding professional sports. As a result, during the last season a total number of 1,361,000 spectators attended games of the first professional football division. Numbers for the first national basketball division has shown that in the 2004–2005 regular seasons, the league experienced a 34% increase in attendance compared to the previous season. As Kolibalis (2003) indicated, the year 2000 expenditures for sport tickets in Greece could be estimated around 16.3 million Euros. While a significant number of studies have focused on Greek participants in various sport and recreation activities (Alexandris, Tsorbatzoudis, & Grouios, 2002; Costa, Tsitskari, Tzetzis, & Goudas, 2004; Kouthouris & Alexandris, 2005; Papadimitriou & Karteroliotis, 2000), research regarding sport fans in Greece is almost non-existent (especially in volleyball), despite the economic and social impact of sport spectatorship in Greek society.

Research on sport spectators and sport fans is examined to develop a model of the psychological connections that individuals experience with sports or sport teams. Wann, Melnick, Russell and Page (2001) outline the differences between a fan and a spectator as well as the differences between highly and lowly identified fans. They define a sport fan as “individuals who are interested in and follow a sport, team, and/or athlete.

Sport spectators “are those individuals who actively witness a sporting event in person or through some form of media (radio, television, etc.)” (Wann et al., 2001).

The interest expressed by researchers and executives for the concept of loyalty stems from the observation that there is a positive correlation between client loyalty and the achievement of significant strategic company goals, such as: increased of revenue, decrease of expenses for product promotion, formation of positive company image, potential to increase prices due to smaller sensitivity to them by loyal customers, and client retention, among others (Rundle-Thiele, & Mackay, 2001).

The fact that fans identify with their sport teams is perhaps the most important facet when attempting to understand their behavior. For this reason, many researchers have included loyalty in models for sport consumer behavior or have examined its relationship with various psychological and social factors and concepts that affect fan behavior. For example, researchers have shown that fans with high levels of loyalty appear to be more psychologically stimulated during a game of their favorite team when compared to those with a lower level of identification (Branscombe & Wann, 1992).

The fans' loyalty is the behavior that is examined with the duration, the frequency and the time which someone dedicates to a particular sport activity. The fans' loyalty attracts researchers' interest, because this term is related with the fans' satisfaction, fans' motivation development, and their identification to their team (Dietz-Uhler, Harrick, End, & Jacquemonde, 2000; James, 2001; Mahony, Madrigal, & Howard, 2000). Loyalty affects the attitudes and behaviors of consumers regarding a product, a service or a business (Backman, & Crompton, 1991, Park, 1996). Two key variables on consumer loyalty have been noted in literature: behavior measurements, which is expressed via parameters such as duration, frequency and time one devotes to attending a sporting event (Iwasaki, & Havitz, 2004) and attitudes towards the specific team; for instance, the intention for positive comments, the importance of the team to the fan and knowledge on the team (Funk, & Pastore, 2000). A significant number of papers have been published concerning the topic of fan loyalty in fan behavior models (e.g. Funk, & Pastore, 2000, Trail, Fink, & Anderson, 2003; Funk, Filo, Beaton, & Pritchard, 2009). These papers are examine the relations of loyalty to other important concepts in sports marketing, such as customer satisfaction, fan motives and needs, gender influence, segmentation and identification (Dietz-Uhler, et al, 2000, James, 2001, Laverie, & Arnett, 2000).

Fans' involvement determines their intention to watch a game in a venue/TV/radio and can be influenced by motivational factors. Taking into account the relationship

between team loyalty and involvement, loyalty is an important factor in the fan's desire to visit a venue and remain there (Wakefield & Sloan, 1995). The level of fan loyalty is measured of their attendance in games (Fisher, & Wakefield, 1998, Matsuoka, Chelladurai, & Harada, 2003, Pease, & Zhang, 2001, Wann, Bayens, & Driver, 2004), the purchase of products bearing the team logo (Fisher, & Wakefield, 1998) and the purchase of products by team sponsors (Gwinner, & Swanson, 2003, Madrigal, 2000). Positive attitude and fan behavior pertain to "customer loyalty" which is a very important concept for marketing.

The model of involvement of McIntyre and Pigram (1992) consists of three dimensions: Attractiveness, Centricity and Self-expression. The first dimension is a combination of initial dimensions of Interest and Satisfaction of Laurent and Kapferer (1985). The satisfaction someone from his participation in an activity is very important factor and it leads in high level of involvement when this satisfactory activity is considered as a very important and worthy for the person. Self-expression is referred to a person who wishes to oppugn to the other people through his participation in an activity. The third dimension, Centricity, referred in the position that this activity plays a main role in the way of person's life. Such an activity is very important for the person, when other activities are centered and organized around of it (e.c. meeting with friends, or meeting with family members) or when it considered that this activity conduce to improve the quality of life and the health maintenance (stress reduction, or other significant benefits for health).

Shank and Beasley (1998) found positive correlation between two dimension of involvement (cognitive and emotional) and the watching games on venue/TV/radio and the reading of sport newspaper. Funk and colleagues (2004) using a sample of 1600 USA basketball fans, resulted that there are 18 factors which influence fans' involvement. The study of fans involvement in a particular sport, could offer responses related in the factors that push up them to watch sport games, and to predict future behaviors. Some fans used to watch football games as a recreation activity, while for other fans this activity is possible a self-expression mean, or the possibility to meet friends.

Given that understanding of fan behavior is a crucial factor for sports marketing executives in order to develop effective marketing strategies and the lack of data on fans of professional Volleyball in Greece, the purpose of this paper was to investigate the relation between fan involvement factors and their loyalty (through attraction, centricity

and self-expression) to their teams and games of the Greek professional volleyball League. Rather, the current investigation attempted to examine the following research questions:

H1: High levels of Attraction will significantly influence fans' loyalty to watch volleyball games (frequency of attending, watching games, etc).

H2: High levels of Centricity will significantly influence fans' loyalty to watch volleyball games (frequency of attending, watching games, etc).

H3: High levels of Self-expression will significantly influence fans' loyalty to watch volleyball games (frequency of attending, watching games, etc).

H4: Attraction, centricity and self-expression should predict behavioural involvement of volleyball fans.

Answer to these questions will further our understanding of sport fandom among Greek volleyball fans and, hopefully, allow future researchers to offer specific testable hypotheses.

Methodology

Sample

The sample of research consisted of 521 sports fans, a subset of those who watched five volleyball matches of the A1 National Category in five different sport venues of Athens in the months of January and February 2010.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire packet contained three sections. The first section asked participants to provide demographic information regarding gender, age and year in school. In the second section, the questionnaire of evaluation of attitudinal loyalty of sports fans, (Theodorakis, & Wann, 2008) was used. The participants indicated how often they attended sporting events in person, watched sporting events on television, listened to sporting events on the radio and discussed sport with friends and relatives. A sample item reads, "In total 15 home games, how many times you go to the venue to watch home games?" Responses options to these scale-items were: 1 = *never*, 2 = *once a year*, 3 = *twice a year*, 4 = *once a month*, 5 = *twice a month*, 6 = *once a week*, 7 = *twice a week* and 8 = *once a day*. The scale was translated into Greek by using a back translation technique (Vallerand, 1989). Two bilingual sport scientists translated the English version into Greek. At the end, a qualified Greek teacher reviewed the

instrument to ensure appropriate language and comprehensiveness before its administration.

The third section the evaluation of fans leisure involvement scale, of Nassis and Theodorakis, (2008) was used. The questionnaire consisted of three factors: *Attractiveness*, *Centricity*, and *Self-Expression*. Responses options in eight-point Likert type scale were: 1 -/I completely disagree to 8 -/I completely agree. All questionnaires were adapted for the present research and the case of Volleyball. The results of Interclass Correlation Coefficient were more than satisfactory ($r > .70$) (for the factors attractiveness $r > .71$, centricity $r > .69$ and self-expression $r > .70$).

Process

For each sport venue studied, a match was selected so that approximately 100 questionnaires were collected while avoiding the selection of the same individuals. Overall, answers from a sample of 521 individuals were collected. The collection of questionnaires was performed before the beginning of match and during breaks (time outs, final set) so that the spectators could complete the questionnaires without being interrupted by the flow of the game. All subjects were informed about the aim of the survey. The questionnaires were anonymous and assured them that their answers will be used only for the aims of research that their participation was completely voluntary and the individual responses would be held in strict confidence. Upon completion of the study (approximately 20 min), the participants were debriefed and excused from the testing session.

Data Analysis

The reliability of all questionnaires was checked by calculating a Cronbach alpha for all questions. For the data analyses frequencies, correlation and regression analysis were used through SPSS 17.

Results

Sample Characteristics

Of the 521 fans, 366 were men (70.2%) and 155 women (29.8%). The largest percentage of them 48.6% ($n = 253$) were between 20 and 29 years of age, while 20% ($n = 105$) of them were between 30 and 39 years of age, 15.8% ($n = 82$) were in the 40-49 interval and 14.4% ($n = 75$) were up to 19 years of age. Regarding marital status 77.5% ($n = 404$) of the fans were single and only 20.5% ($n = 107$) were married. Regarding the education level, the highest percentage, 38.4% ($n = 200$) were high

school graduates, 35.5% (n = 185) university graduates and 12.1% (n = 63) technological institution graduates. The majority of fans, (54.3%, n = 283) were employees in the private sector, while 19.2% (n = 100) were pupils and students. Regarding the monthly income, the largest percentage, i.e., 27% (n = 142) of fans declared an income of 1100 to 1300 €, while 21.7% (n = 113) were in the 800-1000€ range, 16.3% (n = 85) had an income of less than 500 € per month and 15.5% (n = 81) declared 1400-1700 € per month.

Descriptive Statistics

The internal consistency of six dimensions of involvement but also the entire scale was examined using Cronbach α coefficient. The values of α were acceptable for all three subscales of the “Involvement Scale in Recreation” (Table 1). The levels of involvement with volleyball for fans were high. In more detail, the averages were: 3.77 for attractiveness, 3.43 for centrality and 3.09 for self-expression. Results of descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1.

The construct validity of the questionnaire “Involvement Scale in Recreation” for the Greek population, were discussed in an article of Nassis and Theodorakis (2008), where the confirmatory factor analysis verified the existence of three factors.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations of the scale of Involvement and indicators of loyalty for Fans.

	M	S.D.	a
Attractiveness	3.77	1.15	.962
Centricity	3.43	1.22	.964
Self-expression	3.09	1.33	.980
Watching home games	5.34	1.56	
Watching away games	2.68	1.84	
Watching TV	6.03	1.33	
Attending Radio	4.49	2.32	
Talking with friends about sports	6.31	1.51	
I watched games in last years	6.36	3.78	

Regarding the loyalty of fans, the results showed that the largest percentage (28.8%) of fans watched home volleyball games 2-3 times a month, while a fairly significant percentage (18.2%) attends matches 2-3 times a week and 15.4% once a

month. These results do not hold true for away games which the majority (39.2%) attends once a year, while 28.2% of fans never attend away games.

As far as watching games and sports programs on television are concerned, 32.1% of the fans said that they watched games once a week, 29.2% 2-3 times a week, 18.7% 2-3 times a month. Concerning monitoring events / sports programs on radio 21.6% they said track 2-3 times a week, 15.4% 2-3 times per month, 13.6% once a week, while 18, 2% never. Regarding conversations about sports with friends, 26.2% of the fans said that they are engaged 2-3 times a week, 23.2% once, 22.5% every day, while 19.4% 2-3 times per month (Table 2). Regarding watching games in the last years, 24.6% of the fans said that they have been attending in the last five years, 18.6% in the last 10 years and 10.9% in the last two years (Table 3).

Table 2. Frequencies (%) of responses on fans behavioral indicators (1 = never, 2 = once a year, 3 = two or three times a year, 4 = once a month, 5 = two or three times a month, 6 = a once a week, 7 = two or three times a week, 8 = every day.)

	1(%)	2(%)	3(%)	4(%)	5(%)	6(%)	7(%)	8(%)	Total
<i>Watching home games</i>	0.4	1.5	11.1	15.4	28.8	14.6	18.2	10	100
<i>Watching away games</i>	28.2	39.2	6	8.2	7.8	6	1.3	3.3	100
<i>Watching TV</i>	1.9	.4	1.2	6.3	18.7	32.1	29.2	10.2	100
<i>Listening Radio</i>	18.2	12.1	.8	13.1	15.4	13.6	21.6	5.2	100
<i>Talking with friends about sports</i>	1.5	1.2	1.2	4.8	19.4	23.2	26.2	22.5	100

Table 3. Frequencies (%) of responses on watching games in last years.

	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	12	14	15	20	Total
<i>I watched games in last years..</i>	1.9	10.9	9.4	9	24.6	8.1	1.3	8.3	1.5	18.6	.6	.6	2.9	2.3	100

Correlations

To investigate the relationship between the motivation of spectators and their loyalty to their team, correlation analysis was applied, using Pearson's *r* indicator. The correlation test results showed that there was a statistically significant high correlation

between the factors that reflect the involvement of the viewer for pleasure and the loyalty factors: a) frequency of watching home games, b) frequency of watching away games, c) frequency of watching sports events on TV, d) frequency of listening to radio shows, e) the frequency of sports conversations with friends, f) frequency of watching volleyball games in last year. No association was found between the variables of self-expression and centrality to the frequency of watching games in last years. We also found no correlation between the frequency of watching away games, and the frequency of watching games in last years; and low correlation between the frequency of watching games on TV and the frequency of watching games in last years (Table 3).

Table 4. Correlations of dimensions of involvement and indicators of conduct for fans.

	Attractiveness	Centricity	Self-expression	Game watching home	Game watching away	Watching TV	Listening Radio	Sports discussions	Watching volleyball games in last years
Attractiveness	1	.657**	.683**	.488**	.171**	.337**	.132**	.240**	.134**
Centricity		1	.817**	.415**	.132**	.374**	.135**	.294**	.019
Self-expression			1	.477**	.119**	.345**	.124**	.246**	-.045
Watching home games				1	.203**	.548**	.286**	.429**	.111*
Watching away games					1	.056	.347**	.126**	.025
Watching TV						1	.282**	.602**	.207**
Listening Radio							1	.369**	.157**
Sports discussions								1	.262**
Watching volleyball games in last years									1

Regression Analysis

To investigate the influence of fans' involvement in professional sports (professional volleyball) linear regression analysis was applied. The three dimensions of involvement were the independent variables and each of the indicators of loyalty observed in a supporter's behavior was used as the dependent variable per model. In all analyses the three independent variables Attractiveness, centrality and self-expression were entered simultaneously in the model. The results showed that in five analyses the

three dimensions of involvement predicted a statistically significant proportion of the behavior of fans, i.e., 32% for watching games, 36% for watching games on television, 28% for listening to radio shows and 31 % for sports discussions with friends (Table 5). To avoid Type I error by the relatively large number of regression analysis, an adapted Bonferoni was used, which gave the alpha value of around .012. It should be noted that under these alpha scores, only the dimension Attractiveness (pleasure) had a statistically significant contribution in predicting the behavior of fans at all analyses. Also, the centrality factor's predictions were statistically significant only for watching games on TV and participating in sports conversations.

Table 5. Results of Regression Analysis for Prediction of Behavior of Fans based on Involvement factors.

	<i>Watching home Games</i>		<i>Watching away Games</i>		<i>Watching TV</i>		<i>Listening Radio</i>		<i>Sports discussions</i>		<i>Watching volleyball games in last years</i>	
	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>
<i>Attractiveness</i>	.090	5.845**	.054	2.581*	.037	2.588*	.049	1.864*	.025	1.484	.206	4.838**
<i>Centricity</i>	-.007	-.241	.031	.760	.089	3.251**	.044	.856	.109	3.383**	.088	1.072
<i>Self-expression</i>	.084	4.057**	-.013	-.455	.014	.704	-.003	-.097	-.006	-.266	-.226	-3.923**
	R=.526		R=.174		R=.394		R=.159		R=.301		R=.233	
	R ² =.277		R ² =.030		R ² =.156		R ² =.025		R ² =.090		R ² =.054	
	F(3,520)=65.98		F(3,520)=5.4		F(3,520)=31.7		F(3,520)=4.48		F(3,520)=17.1		F(3,520)=9.84	
					4				42			

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to investigate the influence of fan involvement with Volleyball to their loyalty and behavior towards their team in men's professional volleyball League in Greece. Because professional volleyball in Greece has short season duration, it is important to study the attitudes and evaluate fan loyalty to the offered sport production. Unfortunately, only in the last few years' administrative executives in professional volleyball teams in Greece have gotten involved with sports management and began trying to develop organized programs to attract fans in venues and increase sport consumption by following strategies and practices of managers working in the more advanced championships of Europe and America.

A game between two professional teams attracts the attention of millions of fans around the world. Fan behavior before, during and after the game has been studied by people involved for different reasons. On one hand, team administrative executives (managers) are interested in improving their “product” while, on the other hand, state officials need to address issues related to extreme behaviors displayed by fans.

The results from the present study have shown that the level of fan involvement in volleyball was quite high. More specifically, the mean scores for all three factors (Attraction, Centricity, Self-expression) were quite high. Behavior/ loyalty indicators also had relatively high mean scores with the highest being “watching home games” (as opposed to “watching away games”), followed by “watching games on TV”, “discussions with friends” and “watching games in the last few years”. With regards to “watching games and sports shows on TV” and “radio”, a large percentage appeared to be watching games and shows every week while a significant percentage also “discusses the team with friends” every week. Additionally, the majority of fans participating in our survey have been systematically following their team for more than five years.

According to Siomkos, (2002) knowledge of the level of fan involvement with a product is essential for marketing people since psychological affects the buying behavior of consumers. For instance, in order to increase the sales of low involvement products, the proposed strategy is price reduction or discounts while their promotion is more effective when short television advertisements are used with powerful visual messages and minimal text (Siomkos, 2002).

Study results showed a high correlation between all fan involvement factors (Attraction, Centricity, Self-expression) and all fan behavior/ loyalty indicators. More specifically, a high correlation was found between all three involvement factors and “watching home games”, “watching games on TV”, “listening to games on the radio”, “watching away games” and “having discussions on sports with friends” while only the “Attraction” factor was found to be highly correlated with “watching games in the last few years”.

According to the sample involvement profile, the “Attraction” factor influenced fan behavior to a great extent. Also, the “Self-expression” and “Centricity” factors compose the profile of fans that show much greater loyalty to their team. For volleyball fans, watching volleyball games is not merely a pleasant activity but also a mean which they used to transfer the desired messages about their self-image to others. Regarding

“listening to sports shows on the radio” one possible explanation is that nowadays, not many people listen to the radio in general, much less to sports shows.

Results from regression analysis indicate that fan identification with their team is a fairly important factor in predicting sport fan loyalty. Additionally, our results support the results of other studies which showed that fans who are more “psychologically attached” to their team are more likely to have a more positive behavior, such as attending more home games, watching more games on television, buying season tickets, and buying sponsor and team products (Nassis, & Theodorakis, 2008; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Matsuoka et al., 2003; Reese & Mittelstaedt, 2001; Wakefield, et al. 1995; Wann et al., 2004). Recognizing the importance of fan identification and developing strategies for enforcing the bonds between the team and its fans as well as between fans themselves can be the basis for a long-term successful course for a professional team. One could also assume that for such fans, watching volleyball games of their favorite team is pivotal in their way of life. An important point that team administration need to address is the reason why fans who watch the team’s home games are not as loyal as far as away games. Iwasaki and Havitz (1998) determined that important personal and social factors are involved in the relation between involvement and loyalty which can either facilitate or hinder the psychological process which leads from one state to the other. The investigation of the personal and social factors proposed by Iwasaki and Havitz (1998) is also a topic of significant research interest.

Since administrators and executives in professional teams are aware of fan involvement levels, they should design programs aiming to develop long-term relations with fans instead of simply focusing on revenue from advertisements and sponsorships and short-lasting team success in competitions (Underwood, Bond, & Baer, 2001). Another topic which can be investigated in a future study is the role of education, profession and income of fans in relation to the sport they have opted to watch and further research could potentially examine the factors that affect fan identification levels. Lastly, it should be noted that in the present study competed only fans who watched professional volleyball games. Thus, results cannot be generalized to other sport fans.

Research in sports management has shown that a specific fan behavior, that of loyalty to the team is affected by various factors such as identification with the team and being involved with this activity; the study of these factors can guide administrative executives in comprehending fan needs and interests so as to approach fans and service them more efficiently. Furthermore, the data presented in such studies can help

state officials understand the fan profile and their degree of loyalty to the specific team in order to deal with extreme behaviors.

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