

# Sport Consumer Typologies: A Critical Review

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## Abstract

The desire to understand the behavior of sport consumers has been a long-standing goal for sport marketers. This paper critically examines models of sport consumption by undertaking a comparative analysis of the major works completed to the present time. It is suggested that while past works have identified important motivational and behavioral differences, they frequently provide only partial explanations of sport consumer behavior. They are often constrained by an overemphasis on social-psychological traits, and give only limited attention to the cultural and economic context in which behaviors take place. Moreover, they rarely explain how fans might move between different segments, or how relationships with sport teams are formed in the first place. Sport consumer research will be enhanced by a more holistic analysis of values and beliefs that illuminates some of the more shadowy aspects of sport consumer formation, commitment, identity, and game attendance patterns.

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**Dualistic typologies should be seen as a starting point for the design of more multi-faceted models of sport consumption.**

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## Introduction: Differentiating Sport Consumers

Sport consumers display a bewildering array of values, attitudes, and behaviors (Meir, 2000, Shank, 2002; Westerbeek & Smith, 2003). Not all consumers are equally passionate and fanatical, nor use their team to confirm their personal identity (Redden & Steiner, 2000). Neither are they all totally loyal, engrossed in club history, or resistant to change that threatens team values and practices. Some attend games on a regular basis, while others attend only on special occasions. Some consumers spend most of their time engaging in sport chatter and trawling the Internet, while others display their fandom by watching pay television sport channels. They experience sport in different ways, and use team affiliations to meet a diverse range of needs (Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001). This complexity challenges the view that sport consumption can be reduced to a narrow set of homogeneous traits.

This complexity also underpins the desire to construct models of sport consumption that make sense of this disparate behavior, and provides the foundation for models of market segmentation that links behavior to different demographic, so-

cial, and cultural groupings. Effective segmentation can reveal distinctive preferences and needs, identify sources of loyalty and commitment, and highlight differences in spending patterns of sport consumers (Pitts & Stotlar, 1996; Shilbury, Quick, & Westerbeek, 1998). In short, sport consumer typologies allow sport marketers to refine marketing activities, redesign sport products, monitor price sensitivities, reconfigure playing arenas, adjust promotional campaigns, and generally customize the sport experience to fit the peculiar needs of each customer segment.

The purpose of this paper is to critically examine the approaches taken to classify sport consumers, discuss the strengths and limitations of the approaches, and recommend areas of future research for both theoreticians and practitioners. This will be achieved by discussing sport consumption from three perspectives. The first perspective focuses on dualistic models, which essentially involve contrasting one form of sport consumer behavior with its opposite. The second perspective covers tiered models where sport consumers are grouped and then ranked according to the strength of their emotional or financial commitment to the sport or team. The third perspective focuses on multi-dimensional approaches that com-

bine underlying motives for consuming sport products, factors that give sport meaning, indicators of loyalty, levels of emotional attachment, and frequency of game attendance, to produce an array of sport consumer types.

### Dualistic Approaches

Some of the earliest typologies arose out of the changes that took place in European soccer in the 1970s and 1980s. Clarke (1978) developed a simple typology to show how some individuals had been marginalized by the commercial transformation of English soccer. He contrasted *genuine* fans, who used their local teams to construct a sense of community, with *others*, who viewed soccer as a pleasant afternoon's entertainment. Boyle and Haynes (2000) drew similar conclusions about the profile of English soccer fans by distinguishing between *traditional* fans, who were true supporters with a strong sense of the game's history and culture, and *modern* fans, who were attracted to the game because it offered an entertaining, if ephemeral experience. Nash (2000) used the same assumptions to distinguish between *core* fans, who grew up with the game and built enduring emotional attachments to teams, and *corporate* fans who used the game to consolidate their social and professional networks.

Ferrand and Pages (1996) and Quick (2000) also used dualistic approaches in their examination of French soccer followers and Australian sport consumers respectively. They distinguished between *irrational* fans, who had strong tribal and emotional connections with a club or team, and *rational* fans, who were more inclined to use their club and team connection to secure a social or commercial benefit. Rational fans asked questions like What pleasure or return will I get on my investment in a sport team?

These typologies, which are summarized in table 1, confirm that in an increasingly commercialized

sport-world, individuals often take an instrumental approach to sport consumption. However, the typologies are also constrained by an ideological assertion that genuine sport followers have been marginalized by modern consumers, and need to reclaim their pivotal place as authentic sport consumers. From a sport marketing perspective, dismissing a segment because it is not authentic is a recipe for failure, since it limits the potential for attracting new market segments. At the same time, the rational/irrational distinction provides a starting point for understanding the different ways individuals affiliate with their favorite sports and teams.

**Table 1**  
**Dualistic Fan Typologies**

Type 1 Fans	Type 2 Fans
Old	New
Genuine	Corporate
Traditional	Modern
Expressive	Submissive
Irrational	Rational
Symbolic	Civic
Die-hard	Less-loyal

Lewis (2001) has also presented a dualistic approach, but instead of differentiating between genuine and modern fans, focused on the different ways individuals identified with their clubs and teams. He examined a sample of North American professional sport consumers and found that some aligned themselves primarily to the city the team represented, while others aligned themselves with the team itself. The individuals who identified themselves with the city, which in this case was Houston, were labelled *civic* fans. Those who identified with the team, which in this case was the Oilers, were labelled *symbolic* fans.

The complex dynamics of identifying with sports teams were also revealed in a study by Hughson (1999), who examined ethnic-Australian soccer supporters. He distinguished between *expressive* sup-

porters, who were driven by the search for adventure, excitement, and thrills, and *submissive* supporters, who, while strongly committed to their teams, did not share the transgressive and neo-tribal qualities of expressive supporters. Expressive supporters identified most closely with their ethnic and cultural traditions, and used the team as a conduit for displaying this other identity.

Bristow and Sebastian (2001) used the concept of brand loyalty to undertake a dualistic analysis of fans of the Chicago Cubs baseball club. They noted that models of consumer brand loyalty usually assumed that high brand loyalty was linked to strong brand identification, a long historical connection with the brand, and performance expectations that were continually met. The first two elements were used to distinguish *die-hard* or extremely loyal fans from *less loyal* fans. They found that die-hard fans were more brand loyal, had a stronger connection to the club as children, spent more time talking about the club, went to see more games, and spent more money on paraphernalia. Interestingly both die-hard and less loyal fans liked the club to the same extent.

The studies of Lewis (2001), Hughson (1999), and Bristow and Sebastian (2001) mark a significant shift in the use of dualistic models to inform sport consumption analysis. Unlike the English models, neither Lewis nor Hughson privileged one sport-consumption type over the other. They clearly articulated the different ways consumers identify with their favorite teams, and provide a solid foundation for more complex analyses of team identity and attachment. Bristow and Sebastian also broaden our knowledge of sport consumer behavior by highlighting the different meaning consumers attach to the sport experiences and the tenuous relationship between liking a team, being loyal to a team, and regularly attending games.

However, despite these conceptual advances, dualistic models of sport consumption tend to conflate a range of practices into a behavioral straightjacket. By aiming for a neat simplicity, they inhibit our understanding of sport consumer beliefs and attitudes, and restrict attempts to discover new patterns of sport consumer behavior. As such, dualistic typologies should be seen as a starting point for the design of more multifaceted models of sport consumption.

### Tiered Typologies

During the early 1990s, a number of North American studies broadened the analysis of sport consumers by measuring the level and intensity of team attachments. In doing so, they found that sport consumers could be not only be differentiated, but also ranked on the basis of their beliefs and behavior.

Wann and Branscombe (1993) differentiated North American sport consumers on the basis of the intensity of their relationship with a club or team, and measured this intensity by constructing a sport spectator identification scale (SSIS). They concluded that individuals who read a lot of sport material, talked to others about sport a lot, frequently attended games, had a strong general interest in sport, and had a good general sport knowledge, also had strong attachments to teams and players. These *high identification* supporters linked their favorite team to their sense of self and publicly displayed their team loyalty. On the other hand, supporters with weaker attachments read and talked about sport less, at-

tended fewer games, watched less sport on television, and had less knowledge about sport. They were the *low identification* supporters. The Wann and Branscombe model consequently laid the foundation for a sport fan continuum that provided for multiple levels of attachment, loyalty, and identification.

Mullin, Hardy, and Sutton (1993) used a similar set of assumptions about North American sport followers to produce their model of sport consumption. They claimed that sport consumers could be located along a frequency escalator, with *highly committed* consumers who attend games regularly at the top of the escalator, those with *low commitment* or low attenders at the bottom of the escalator, and *moderately committed* consumers somewhere near the middle. They suggested that the goal of sport marketers was to move consumers up the escalator and consequently increase their consumption of sport products.

Kahle, Kambra, and Rose (1996) focused their analysis on North American consumers, and used the experiences of college football spectators to construct a three-level typology. The first type was labeled *internalized and highly involved*. These individuals sought close attachment and identification, and constructed strong tribal relationships with their team. At a lower level of intensity were *self-expressives* who sought excitement and the big experience, but were less inclined to incorporate the team in their sense of self. Finally, there were *camaraderie* sport consumers who had only a slight commitment

to the team, but enjoyed the social interaction with other team supporters.

Sutton, McDonald, Milne, and Cimperman (1997) also developed a three-tier model of sport consumption from North American sources. On the top tier were *vested fans*, who had a strong sense of ownership, high levels of emotional investment in their team, and a greater tendency to define themselves through their team or club. On the middle tier were *focused fans*, whose commitment and investment of emotional energy was contingent upon the success of the team. On the bottom tier were *social fans* who, while low on team identification, were attracted to the entertainment value of the game.

Clowes and Tapp (1999) also developed a three-part typology from English football data and used the same tiered approach to distinguish between *fanatics*, *committed casuals*, and *care-free casuals*. Like Kahle et al. (1996) they suggested a clear hierarchy of loyalty and commitment, with fanatics at the top and care-free casuals at the bottom.

When Wann and Branscombe (1993), Mullin et al. (1993) Kahle et al. (1996) Sutton et al. (1997), and Clowes and Tapp (1999) are compared, three common sport consumer types emerge. At the top of the tier are the vested and highly committed consumers, in the middle are the expressive and focused consumers, while at the bottom are the social and camaraderie consumers who display the lowest levels of commitment. The tiered models are summarized in Table 2 below.

**Table 2**  
*Common Elements in Tiered Fan Typologies*

Tier	Primary focus of fan	Secondary focus of fan	Type
1	Emotional connection to team	Excitement and special experience	Internalised, focussed, vested
2	Excitement and entertainment, the big experience	Emotional connection to team	Self expressive, committed casual
3	Social interaction and entertainment	Team identification	Camaraderie, care-free casual, social

The tiered models have added substantially to our knowledge of sport consumption, demonstrating that sport consumers have different relationships with their favorite teams and that they approach their sport consumption in different ways. That is, consumption is expressed through not only tribal connections to teams, but also through social interaction and being entertained. On the other hand, tiered models of sport consumption cannot readily accommodate differences within each step or tier. Neither do they say much about what causes sport consumers to move from one tier to the next. They also assume a positive link between loyalty, identity, and consumption without providing strong empirical support. Finally, they give us only a partial understanding of the underlying beliefs and motives that drive an individual's loyalty, attachment, and sport consumption behavior.

### Multidimensional Typologies

Some of the limitations of tiered models of sport consumption have been addressed with the development of typologies that run across two or more dimensions. Holt (1995) constructed one of the earliest multidimensional models of sport consumption using consumers of the Chicago Cubs Baseball Club as primary data. The first dimension centered on the subjective *experiences* of consumers and how they connected to the team using both rational and emotional behaviors. The second dimension centered on the ways consumers went about *integrating* the club and its personality into their sense of self. The third dimension centered on the ways consumers used the sport experience to classify their *relationships* to the club, and project that relationship to the wider community. The final dimension focused on the *play* element in consumption and how consumers played out their sport experience alongside fellow consumers. Holt concluded that sport consumption not only in-

involved a forum for expressing emotional attachments to a team, but was also used to engage in strategic analysis, confirm individual identity, signify one's social position, converse with other sport consumers in a common setting, and indulge in playful exchanges.

McDonald and Milne (1997) used relationship marketing theory to construct a two-dimensional model of sport consumer behavior. They categorized sport consumers on the basis of their value to the

*passionate partisans* who attended games regularly, were loyal to their team, and identified closely with its players, traditions and collective image. The second were the *champ followers* who were less fanatical, and committed only when their team performed well. The third category was the *reclusive partisans*, whose commitment to the team was strong, but attended infrequently. In contrast to these parochial consumers, who valued team affiliation above all else, Smith and Stewart

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## Multi-dimensional models revealed a multiplicity of social and psychological factors that shape the behavior of sport consumers.

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team or club (their lifetime value or LTV) and their level of commitment to the club or team (their relative relationship strength or RRS). Consumers were subsequently characterized by one of four types. The first type was the most attractive to the club, being highest on both value (LTV) and relative relationship (RRS). The second type was high on value but low on relative relationship. The third type was low on value but high on relative relationship. The final type was low on both value and relative relationship, and the least attractive to the club or team.

McDonald and Milne suggested that type 1 consumption represented the ideal relationship since it combined a high commitment with the highest levels of financial support. Like Mullin et al. (1993), they concluded that sport marketers should focus their attention on designing strategies to move customers up the sport consumption escalator to higher levels of commitment and financial support.

Using Australian sport leagues data, Smith and Stewart (1999) produced a typology that focused on the attitudes and behaviors of sport consumers. By examining motives for attending games and frequency of match attendance, Smith and Stewart identified five different sport consumer types. The first were the

identified two additional types who were more interested in the quality of the game. The first type were *theatergoers* who primarily sought entertainment and were attracted to comfortable venues, star players, and the expectation of a close contest. The second type was *aficionados*, who, like theatergoers, were attracted to exciting games but were also attracted to games that provided skill and tactical complexity, even if they were likely to be one-sided.

Mahony, Madrigal, and Howard (2000) adopted a similar conceptual approach to Smith and Stewart in examining North American sport consumers. They created a psychological commitment to team (PCT) scale to measure commitment levels and reveal the strength of an individual's relationship with a team. Attendance was measured by asking individuals how often they went to home games. These two indicators were used to construct a two-dimensional measure of loyalty. The first dimension was an attitudinal component (my team is important to me, and I am highly committed), while the second dimension was a behavioral component (I go to my team's home games and attend regularly).

Four types of team loyalty resulted from the Mahony et al. (2000) research. The highest level of

loyalty was labeled *true loyalty* and involved both strong commitment and strong attendance. The next level was labeled *spurious loyalty*, which involved weak commitment, but strong attendance at home games. The next level of loyalty was labeled *latent loyalty* and included a strong commitment to the team, but a low level of attendance at home games. The most fragile type was labeled *low loyalty* and included both weak commitment, and weak home game attendance.

Hunt, Bristol, and Bashaw (1999) also used commitment as a way of distinguishing between sport consumers, but added a time and space dimension to their analysis. Using themes that centered on identification, attachment and the processing of sport-related information, they identified five types of sport consumers. The first type were *temporary fans* whose identification with players and teams was time constrained. Temporary fans were committed so long as the team was winning, star players were performing, and events had media reinforcement. They wanted value from their sport experience and lost interest when the pay-off from their fandom fell. The second type were *local fans* whose identification was linked to a geographic area. Local fans supported their local team because it represented their town or city, rather than using the team to confirm their own sense of self. The third type were *devoted fans* whose identification was linked to a sense of self. They were more strongly committed than temporary and local fans, more loyal to the team, and therefore less likely to jettison the team when it performed poorly. The fourth type were *fanatical fans* whose team identification was expressed in very public ways. They not only attended games more frequently, but also painted their body in team colors and continually collected memorabilia. The fifth type were *dysfunctional fans* whose identification with team was so strong that it dominated their lives. They obsessively connected

with the team, believed that winning mattered more than anything else, and often engaged in anti-social behavior when their team performed poorly.

Funk and James (2001) developed a more complex model of sport consumer behavior that they titled the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM). Instead of using tiers and escalators, they adopted an in-

cremental stage metaphor to frame their analysis. According to Funk and James, sport consumers move through four stages or floors of sport and team identification. The first stage or floor was labeled *awareness*. At this ground floor level, individuals were aware of the existence of different sports and teams, but had little commitment or interest in them. The next level, or first floor, was labeled *attraction*. In these instances, consumers used sport as an escape from the routines of daily life and were attracted to a team because it provided amusement and excitement. However, they did not strongly identify with the team. The next level, or second floor of commitment was labeled *attachment*. Individuals with a strong attachment developed a more stable connection with the sport or team and invested more time and emotional energy into team activities. The top or third floor contained fans with the most passionate level of commitment, which was labeled *allegiance*. In these instances consumers gave a high priority to loyalty, and incorporated the team image into their own sense of self. They spent more time reading about the team, engaging in sport chatter with other fans, and attending games.

Gladden and Funk (2002) used the concepts of brand equity and brand association to create a three-dimensional approach to team identification. By examining the at-

titudes and behaviors of a sample of North American sport consumers they found that association with teams were formed in three specific ways. First, consumers connected to teams via *product features* that included the coach, team management, the team logo, team colors, star players, and facilities and services. Second, they connected to teams via *product benefits* that

were either experiential (an escape from daily routines and pressures, a means of connecting to the past, and as a way of developing pride in place and community solidarity) or symbolic (self-enhancement, role position, group membership and ego-identification). Finally, they connected to teams via *attitudes*, which included the importance of the team to the individual and knowledge of the team. In total, Gladden and Funk identified sixteen brand association factors that they used to construct a Team Association Model (TAM) which provided the foundation for establishing profiles of sport consumers.

The above multidimensional models show that sport consumption involves a broad range of motivations and beliefs. At the same time they can be consolidated into a number of behavioral clusters that highlight the different ways in which consumers express their sporting interests. These clusters include primary motivators, emotional commitment, economic and financial commitment, levels of identification, loyalty, connective focus, overt experiences, and frequency of game attendance. These eight dimensions of sport consumption are summarized in Table 3 below.

These models not only confirm that sport consumption has cognitive, effective and behavioral components, but also challenge the view that loyalty and commitment

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**Table 3**  
*Multidimensional Approaches to Sport Consumption*

Cluster type	Differentiating behaviors
Underlying motivations	Escape (to a less stressful 'sports-world') Eustress (excitement, and entertaining event) Social interaction
Emotional attachment	Obsessive attachment and strong commitment Moderate attachment and conditional commitment Slight attachment and fragile commitment
Economic attachment	High value: strong financial commitment Moderate value: intermediate financial commitment Low value: weak financial commitment
Identity	Team used to confirm self-concept Team used to confirm civic and community pride Team used to confirm social or cultural identity
Loyalty	Loyalty through game attendance Loyalty through displaying team colors Loyalty through chatter and conversation
Connective focus	Team is primary connection Sport or league is primary connection Player is primary connection
Overt experiences	Rational: strategic analysis Symbolic: gestures, ceremonies and rituals Social: play and social integration
Attendance at games	Frequent Moderate Low

are directly translated into active consumption. Mahony et al. (2000) noted that some individuals displayed latent loyalty that involved high commitment but low attendance. Similarly Smith and Stewart's (1999) passive partisan displayed strong team affiliation, but relatively low levels of attendance. So too did McDonald and Milne's (1997) type 3 sport consumer, who rated high on team attachment, but low on financial value. These contradictions were not revealed in the tiered models of sport consumption.

The multidimensional models also provide a richer description of the factors that underpin sport consumption. Holt (1995) in particular revealed a multiplicity of social and psychological factors that shape the behavior of sport consumers. Moreover, Holt convincingly demonstrated that sport consumers engage

in entangled displays of fandom that combine identity formation with social interaction, and strategic analysis with play and ritual.

Finally Hunt et al. (1999), Funk and James (2001), and Gladden and Funk (2002) demonstrate that sport consumption involves more complex patterns of team identification than the tiered models suggest. Hunt et al., and Funk and James showed that committed sport consumers can be differentiated, while Gladden and Funk identified sixteen variables that defined the sport consumption experience.

### **Toward a Better Understanding of Sport Consumption**

The first thing to be said about the above studies is that they provide a rich and varied analysis of sport consumption. At the same

time, there is a significant overlap, and the empirical support for some of the models is slim. In general though, they confirm that sport consumption is multifaceted, and involves far more than simply turning up to a game, tuning in, and going home. In the following section we aim to draw together the main themes and issues arising from our earlier discussion and analysis, and critically assess the strengths and weaknesses of sport consumption research undertaken so far.

### **Defining Sport Consumption**

The studies reviewed in this paper show that it impossible to describe the archetypal sport consumer, because there are a multitude of interdependent values, attitudes, and behaviors to consider (Holt, 1995). While some of the early dualistic models of sport con-

sumption confined fandom to displays of passionate attachments to teams, and habitual game attendance (Clarke, 1978; Mason, 1999), Wann and Branscombe (1993) correctly noted that a sport fan is someone who says they are a sport fan. In other words, sport consumption is a self-defining phenomenon. As Jones (1997) noted, being a sport fan "comprises more than attending and observing a sporting event" (p.1). Taking a broad view of sport consumption can only be a good thing from a researcher's perspective.

### **Identifying Differences**

The above studies also show that sport consumers can be segmented from many perspectives. Moreover, they have their origins in not only what sport consumers do (their behavior) but also what they feel and say (their motivations and beliefs). This distinction underpins the studies of Funk and James (2001), Holt (1995), Gladden and Funk (2002), Hunt et al. (1999), Mahony et al. (2000), and Smith and Stewart (1999). Some sport consumers are passionate and obsessive, while others more casual about their team relationship (Kahle et al., 1996). Some primarily identify with a team, while others connect more with the game and the league (Smith & Stewart, 1999; Hill & Green, 2000). Some committed consumers regularly attend games, while others with a high level of commitment do not (Mahony et al., 2000). Some sport consumers express their fandom through chatter, reading newspapers, and television viewing, while others dress up in team colors as a way of displaying their team affiliation (Hunt et al., 1999; Gladden & Funk 2002). Some slavishly surf the Internet, while some spend lavishly on memorabilia and collectables. Many sport consumers use their team allegiance to socialize with other true believers (Holt, 1995). Others consume sport in order to escape the routine of daily life (Gladden & Funk, 2002).

### **Benefits of Demarcation**

While models of sport consumption tend to fragment sport consumer behaviors and can dilute

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## **The emotional connection that individuals have with a sport becomes more complex the deeper we look.**

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their strategic value for sport marketers, they also capture important distinctions. Lewis' (2001) contrast of civic and symbolic fans is a good example, as is the distinction Hunt et al. (2000) make between fanatical and dysfunctional fans. So too is Hughson's distinction between sport consumers that individually identify with the team and those who use the team to express a broader cultural identity.

As a result, researchers should be encouraged to examine sport consumption behavior in accordance with an individual's self-perception, since it produces more personalized and divergent responses. While recording every microscopic difference creates a mass of disparate data waiting to be classified, these subjective experiences can also reveal distinctive sport consumer traits that previously went unrecognized.

### **Rational-Irrational Distinctions**

Many of the typologies discussed above, particularly, Ferrand and Pages (1996), Holt (1995), Hunt et al. (1999), and Quick (2000) show a rational-irrational division between sport consumers. Some sport consumers want tangible outcomes like an entertaining experience, comfortable seating at the venue, and access to merchandise and memorabilia (Wakefield & Sloan, 1995; Wakefield, Blodgett, & Sloan, 1996). In contrast, other consumers connect to their team in emotional ways, and poor team performance and substandard facilities are no impediment to their commitment and sense of identification. (Funk & James, 2001; Hunt et al., 1999). This distinction between the highly rational fan and the highly emotional fan is an interesting one, and

has been closely examined by Holt (1995) who found that most participants in his study were simultaneously rational and irrational. They

not only displayed their passionate team allegiance, but also spent time analyzing team selection, tactics, and performance. The rational-irrational distinction has been under-researched, and would be a productive area for more detailed empirical study.

### **Understanding the Emotional Connection**

Studies of sport consumption also show that the emotional connection that individuals have with a sport, team, or player becomes more complex the deeper we look. They can be temporary and slight, or permanent and obsessive, and are most clearly articulated in the studies of Funk and James (2001), Hunt et al. (1999), and Kahle et al. (1996). These connections not only vary in their intensity, but also in their form. For example, some consumers incorporate their favorite team into their sense of sense of self and create a personal identity around the team (Holt, 1995). Others use the sport or team as a means of identifying with a town or city (Hunt et al., 1999; Lewis, 2001), while others may use the team to strengthen a racial, class, gender, or ethnic identity (Hughson, 1999; Jones, 2000). In other words, the identification process is more complex than some sport marketers would have us believe, since sport consumers can link a team to their sense of self in fundamentally different ways.

The above studies also demonstrate that loyalty is a pivotal part of the sport consumer experience. As Mahony et al. (2000) and Bristow and Sebastian (2001) show, most consumers see loyalty as a defining feature of their relationship with a sport team or player. Elevator mod-

els of the Funk and James (2001) type and multidimensional approaches that capture the escalation of fandom conceptualize this relationship the best.

However, the link between loyalty, identity, and consumption can be problematic. While sport consumers who have a highly emo-

sumers will provide valuable insights for sport marketers.

### ***Fan Hierarchies and Weightings***

Many of the above studies also contain an implied hierarchy of sport consumers. For the most part, passionate supporters are given the

consumers. This ambivalence about transitional consumers is short sighted since it assumes they are low yield. However, this notion denies the possibility that an incremental shift in their behavior will produce a significant benefit. Indeed, McDonald and Milne (1997) contend that effective sport marketing is all about getting customers to "move up the escalator to higher levels of financial and emotional commitment" (p. 31). These lower bands of casual consumer types are empirically tantalizing, but conceptually underdeveloped. Further analysis and development is needed to tease out more data on their underlying beliefs about attachment, loyalty, identity, and sport consumption.

### ***Avoiding Duplication***

Our review of the sport consumption research literature shows there has been a sustained progression in its breadth and sophistication. Rudimentary analysis that contrasted real and authentic consumers with their opposite has given way to multifaceted models grounded in solid theories of consumer behavior. These theories have been used to construct detailed typologies that differentiate sport consumers around a number of factors including emotional attachment to teams, loyalty, and identity, which are then linked to specific patterns of consumption like game attendance, television viewing, and the purchase of team merchandise. However, as the number of sport consumption typologies expands, it becomes increasingly clear that many types and segments can be conflated into a small number of common core dimensions. Many of the studies examined in this paper were very often saying the same thing with a different nomenclature. The tiered models of Wann and Branscombe (1993), Mullin et al. (1993), Kahle et al. (1996), Sutton et al. (1997), and Clowes and Tapp (1999) are good examples. As Funk and James (2001) politely noted, "any effort to

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## **There is no single best conceptual model, since they all have strengths and limitations.**

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tional attachment to a team will be loyal, the studies of and Bristow and Sebastian (2001) and Clowes and Tapp (1999) found that individuals with a more casual connection to a team may also possess a great store of loyalty. Moreover, loyalty does not necessarily translate into frequent match attendance. While Wann and Branscombe (1993) and Funk and James (2001) suggested that sport consumers who attended most frequently were also loyal, the studies of Clowes and Tapp (1999) and Mahony et al. (2000) indicated that many committed and loyal team fans did not attend regularly. At the same time, there were also a group of less committed and loyal consumers who attended more frequently. These findings suggests that sport consumers express their loyalty in various ways. Regular attendance is one way, while reading newspapers, chatter, purchasing club merchandise, and watching games on television are other ways. This fractured connection between loyalty and attendance is compounded by the growing tendency for some consumers to value match-day entertainment over the parochial support of their team (Smith & Stewart 1999). Models that distinguish between emotionally connected high-attendees and emotionally connected low-attendees are therefore essential to accommodate this crucial, but often ignored, aspect of sport consumer behavior. Empirical studies that can illuminate the different patterns of behavior within groups of emotionally connected and loyal sport con-

most weight because of their high level of emotional investment and game attendance. They have been variously described as tribal, irrational, expressive, internalized, vested, fanatics, allegiance, and passionate partisans. Their privileged position is encapsulated by the use of the term genuine (Clarke, 1978; Nash 2000). At the other end of the continuum are the less committed supporters who have been variously described as rational, submissive, expressive, social, carefree-casuals, attraction, and theatregoers. There is some merit in the hierarchy approach since it correctly implies that some sport consumers contribute more equity than others (Pitts & Stotlar, 1996). It also highlights the crucial importance of committed consumers to the ongoing financial health of sporting competitions and organizations (McDonald & Milne, 1997).

On the other hand, a heavy-handed application of hierarchical models of sport consumption to sport marketing can marginalize consumers who are not as passionate or committed, or indeed are seen to be too passionate and anti-social (Hunt et al., 1999). Hierarchical models of sport consumption consequently require critical re-assessment by sport marketers, since they are underpinned by heavily value-laden assumptions (Nash, 2000).

Hierarchical models also imply that it is not necessary to hard-sell to committed consumers, and that we should be cautious about investing resources in so-called casual



re-write the literature (on sport consumption) becomes an exercise in untangling semantic differences" (p. 120). Typologies that may, on the surface, look quite different are frequently saying the same thing. In short, the desire for an expanded demarcation of sport consumer types may have to be tempered by critical analysis that weighs the benefit of constructing a new sport consumer segment against the cost of converting it into an operational marketing strategy. The need to formalize every unique consumer experience should be balanced against the expediency of a more generalized segmentation model.

### **Implications for Future Sport Consumption Research**

Our analysis of sport consumption studies suggests that there is no single best conceptual model, since they all have strengths and limitations. At the same time, the strongest models of sport consumption have a number of distinguishing features. First, they are grounded in solid theories of consumer behavior, with the studies of Funk and James (2001), Gladden and Funk (2002) and Holt (1995) being exemplars in this respect. Second, they clearly articulate each sport consumer type or segment, and link their behavior to underlying beliefs and motives. The models of Bristow and Sebastian (2001), Funk and James (2001), Hunt et al. (1999), Mahony et al. (2000) and Lewis (2001) meet this criteria. Third, they explain the implication of each sport consumer type and segment for subsequent marketing strategies. This task was impressively completed by Kahle et al. (1996), Mahony et al. (2000), McDonald and Milne (1997), and Sutton et al. (1997). Finally, they are supported by broad base of empirical support. The survey by Funk (2002) was particularly relevant in this respect, since it was based upon the previously constructed Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) (Funk & James, 2001). Funk

confirmed the theoretical foundations of PCM by identifying casual, moderate, and loyal market segments using six sport consumer associations (like team identification and nostalgia) and eighteen survey questions at an accuracy level of more than 70%. Funk's empirical study validates the claim that while sport consumer typologies can be theoretically sound by encompassing a full spectrum of beliefs, meanings, and behaviors, their ultimate value comes from capturing real consumer experiences.

munications, and therefore require customized messages to elicit greater team attachment, is often not supported by hard evidence. As with all aspects of sport marketing, sport consumer typologies need to be tempered in the forge of market practice.

The relationship between a consumer and a sport team is complicated by the fact that individuals bring their own personalities and values to their sport experience. Moreover, they are subject to a broad range of external factors that

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### **Sport marketers need to select models of sport consumption that fit their tactical intentions.**

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Nevertheless, there are also a number of areas where research into sport consumption requires further development. There is a crucial need for additional empirical studies that can be used to test the conceptual models discussed above. For example, Holt (1995), Hunt et al. (1999), Lewis (2001), and Smith and Stewart (1999) have designed some tantalizing models of sport consumption, but need more detailed empirical surveys to test the credibility of their sport consumer types. Specifically, the aficionado segment in the Smith and Stewart model and the dysfunctional fan described by Hunt et al. are fascinating types, but are currently underdeveloped. They need to be tested to establish their significance and market value. In this respect, there are strong grounds for undertaking more qualitative research that uses in-depth interviews to tease out some of the more subterranean beliefs and motivations that underpin the above models of sport consumption (Jones, 1997).

More work also needs to be undertaken on methodologies that can assist practitioners in designing strategies for many of the market segments identified in the studies examined in this paper. For example, the assumption that different sport consumer types respond indifferently to standard marketing com-

mediate their relationship with their favorite sport, team and players (Funk & James, 2001, Kates, 1998). These mediating factors include gender, family structure and values, household income, friendship groups, the social milieu in which sport consumers run their daily lives, the class or subculture to which they belong, their sensitivity to price, and the cost of sport activities (Fort, 2003, Hunt et al., 1999; Wann et al., 2001). Contextual factors have usually been ignored by sport consumer researchers. This constitutes a serious weakness, and the quality of sport consumption research would be enhanced by more multidisciplinary studies that locate sport consumption in a cultural and economic context. (Fort, 2003; Kates, 1998; Shank, 2002).

Neither do many of the above studies have much to say about the ways in which sport consumption originates and evolves. Yet, this is fundamental to the development of a supporter base for any sporting competition. As Bristow and Sebastian (2001) suggest, understanding the behavior of the very young sport consumers may be the key to unlocking the door to fan loyalty (p. 271). The issue of how young people in particular construct their patterns of sport team attachment constitutes an important challenge for subsequent research.

Finally, apart from Funk and James (2001), the studies reviewed in this paper reveal little about the mobility of consumers along the frequency escalator, or from one type to another. Future models of sport consumption could enhance their explanatory powers by saying more about those factors that may cause an individual to change their sport consumption behavior. Funk and James (2001) have laid the foundation, and more studies that focus on changing patterns of sport consumption would be very instructive. The most useful models of sport consumption should be capable of specifying the gatekeepers and drivers of movement between levels and forms of fandom and the consequent change in consumption. To this end, there are significant pay-offs from undertaking longitudinal studies that trace the behavior of sport consumers over time. Whereas life-cycle metaphors and processes have been successfully applied to sport products (Mullin et al., 2000), no equivalent studies have been undertaken on sport consumers.

### Implications for Sport Marketers

The above analysis makes a strong case for employing some form of segmentation model in developing marketing strategies for attracting sport consumers to sport products. A segmented model not only forces sport marketers to differentiate the market, but also encourages them to develop a more detailed understanding of the motives and values that underpin specific aspects of consumer behavior.

To this end, a number of practical issues need to be addressed. First, the studies discussed above suggest that sport consumption has both an irrational and rational component. The irrational component signals the need to provide experiences that enable sport consumers to identify with teams, and escape into a world of passion, exuberant ritual, and idle chat. At the same time, the rational component sig-

nals the need to provide experiences that involve strategic analysis, commercial exchanges, and value adding.

Second, sport marketers should not only promote the benefits of identifying with the team and its players, but also the benefits of witnessing a spirited contest and high quality game. A number of typologies identified customer segments that involved high value supporters being attracted to the game as a whole rather than to a particular team. These game-quality, high value segments, which comprise both corporates and individuals, are likely to become increasingly lucrative sources of income for sport organizations and a strategic focal point for sport marketers.

Third, sport marketers need to select models of sport consumption that fit their tactical intentions. While in some cases the acquisition of new sport consumers will be a priority, in other cases the primary aim will be to maximize post-purchase relationships. As a result, marketers should be aware of the power different sport consumption models have in targeting and revealing consumer readiness. Moreover, some models excel at identifying and classifying motivations for consumption decisions, but are less useful in specifying the preconditions to gain consumer attention, interest, and desire. In short, some models will provide a strong theoretical base, while others will have a more concrete application to market place strategies.

### Conclusion

In summary, the desire to understand the consumption patterns of sport consumers has been a long-standing goal for sport marketers. This goal has often been framed by typologies that aim to reveal the motivations and behaviors upon which to base segmentation models of sport consumption. Sport consumer typologies allow sport marketers to customize their marketing communications to sport consumers, but differentiating the moti-

vational complexities of individuals can be problematic. While many models of sport consumption identify interesting cognitive and affective differences between consumers, their analysis is frequently limited to one or two behavioral traits. Some of the multidimensional models are more effective in segmenting consumers and frequently reveal subtle nuances that people bring to their sport consumption experiences. However, they also have their limitations, since they rarely discuss how individuals move between different segments or change their beliefs and behaviors. Nor do they explain precisely how relationships between consumers and teams are formed in the first place. Sport consumer research will be enhanced by a greater use of multidisciplinary teams using longitudinal studies to collect data that covers both the individual behavior of consumers and the social and economic context in which this behavior takes place. They will provide a rich description of consumer values and beliefs, and changes in their sport-related behavior (Jones, 1997). This will not only add to the body of knowledge on sport consumption, but also assist sport marketers to more effectively meet the needs of what is an increasingly complex and idiosyncratic market.

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