

The Influence of Relationship Quality on Sport Consumption Behaviors: An Empirical Examination of the Relationship Quality Framework

Yu Kyoum Kim
Florida State University

Galen Trail
Seattle University

Yong Jae Ko
University of Florida

The importance of relationship quality in relationship marketing has been well documented; however, very little attention has been paid to the issues of relationship quality in sport consumer behavior contexts. We investigated the cognitive structure of relationship quality (RQ) constructs (Trust, Commitment, Intimacy, Identification, Reciprocity) by comparing a general-specific model to a hierarchical model. In addition we empirically tested the link between RQ and three sport consumer behavioral intentions: attendance, media consumption, and licensed merchandise consumption. The model comparison revealed that individual constructs reflected both the distinct aspects of the specific dimensions of relationship quality and the holistic nature of relationship quality, supporting a general-specific model. Results from the simultaneous equation model indicated that for sport consumers, relationship quality with the team explained 56% of the variance in intention to attend games, 75% of intention to consume sport media, and 66% of intention to purchase licensed merchandise.

Relationship marketing can be defined as “all marketing activities directed towards establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges” (Morgan & Hunt, 1994, p. 22). In recent years, both researchers and practitioners have increasingly emphasized the importance of relationship marketing in sport organizations (Harris & Ogbonna, 2008). The reason for the increased focus on relationship marketing is that researchers and sport marketers generally believe that relationship marketing efforts can enhance relationships with sport consumers. These enhanced customer relationships can eventually result in increased team performance outcomes, such as ticket sales, sport media consumption and licensed merchandise sales. Although relationship marketing has been advocated as an effective strategy to foster sport consumption behaviors, extant research provides limited insights about how relationship marketing influences sport consumption behaviors. A relationship quality approach can offer a valuable framework for connecting relationship marketing to sport consumption behaviors of interest.

Relationship quality can be defined as a metaconstruct composed of several distinct but related facets

such as trust, commitment, identification, intimacy, and reciprocity, which reflect overall assessment of strength and depth of relationships between organizations and consumers (De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, & Iacobucci, 2001; Fournier, 1998; Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006). Achieving a better understanding of relationship quality is critical for both implementing and studying relationship marketing for the following reasons. First, relationship quality helps systematically arrange a wide array of relational constructs built on various theoretical bases into a single conceptual framework (Fournier, 1998). Second, relationship quality serves as a useful measure to evaluate the effectiveness of relationship marketing (De Wulf et al., 2001). Third, relationship quality offers a tool for diagnosing the pitfalls in building and maintaining relationships with customers and devising effective and efficient remedies for those problems (Roberts, Varki, & Brodie, 2003). Fourth, relationship quality provides a benchmark to separate successful relationships from unsuccessful relationships. Lastly, relationship quality is regarded as a key component of customer equity. Customer equity typically refers to the lifetime value of customers to an organization that focuses on costs of acquisition and retention of the customers (Blattberg & Deighton, 1996), and, to a greater extent, customer equity has become recognized as an essential factor for making investment and price decisions (Wiesel, Skiera, & Villanueva, 2008).

Kim is with Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL. Trail is with MSAL, Seattle University, Seattle, WA. Ko is with the Dept. of Tourism, Recreation, and Sport Management, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL.

The importance of relationship quality in relationship marketing has been well supported; however, very little attention has been paid to the issues of relationship quality in sport consumer behavior contexts. The fundamental characteristics of relationships substantially differ across types of consumers and products (Berscheid & Peplau, 1983; Fournier, 1998). For both researchers and sport marketers then, it will be advantageous to more fully understand the unique nature of relationship quality between a sport consumer and a team.

Kim and Trail (in press) recently developed a conceptual framework proposing the essential constructs of sport consumer-team relationship quality (trust, commitment, intimacy, identification, and reciprocity) and identifying expected outcomes of sport consumer-team relationship quality (attendance, media consumption, and licensed merchandise consumption). Empirical testing of conceptual models and theoretical propositions are vital steps in the scientific inquiry process of a research phenomenon. Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to empirically test a conceptual model of sport consumer-team relationship quality based on Kim and Trail's conceptual model to build a better relationship quality knowledge-base in a sport consumer behavior context. More specifically, the objectives of this study were to: (a) identify the key constructs to assess the quality of the relationship between sport consumers and the team; (b) investigate the cognitive structure of the sport consumer-team relationship quality constructs by conceptually and empirically comparing a general-specific model of relationship quality to a hierarchical model and (c) identify expected behavioral outcomes of relationship quality and empirically examine the link between relationship quality and sport consumer behaviors, including attendance, sport media consumption and licensed merchandise product consumption.

Theoretical Framework

Relationship Quality Constructs

Kim and Trail (in press), as per Eisenhardt (1989), used the following processes to determine the essential sport consumer-team relationship quality constructs: extant literature review, expert opinion from a panel of practitioners and academics, and past experience. First, they selected the relationship quality constructs that were identified in more than three articles across various areas of study. Next, after a further review of the extant literature and experts' critique, the initially selected constructs, not considered to be critical to understanding relationship quality between sport consumers and a team, were removed. As a result, the conceptual framework included the following five relationship quality constructs: trust, commitment, intimacy, identification, and reciprocity.

Trust. Trust can be defined as "one party's belief that its needs will be fulfilled by actions undertaken by the other party" (Anderson & Weitz, 1989, p. 312). Based on

reported evidence, there appears to be general agreement among researchers that trust is a key component of relationship quality (Fournier, 1998; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Palmatier, Jarvis, Beckhoff, & Kardes, 2009). Furthermore, the importance of trust in establishing and maintaining long-term relationships has been repeatedly stressed in the extant literature (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Palmatier et al., 2006). Although research on trust in a sport consumer behavior context has been sparse, previous research provides enough evidence for the following two suggestions to be made. First, consumers' trust can be placed in inanimate objects such as brands and firms (Fournier, 1998; Garbarino & Johnson, 1999). Second, trust is an essential ingredient for all types of relational exchanges, including the one between a consumer and a firm (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Drawing on the above literature, Kim and Trail (in press) proposed that the concept of trust between sport consumers and a team is tenable; trust is an essential component of sport consumer-team relationship quality.

Commitment. Commitment has been considered as "an exchange partner believing that an ongoing relationship with another is so important as to warrant maximum efforts at maintaining it; that is, the committed party believes that relationship is worth working on to ensure that it endures indefinitely" (Morgan & Hunt, 1994, p. 23). Together with trust, commitment has been the most commonly accepted component of relationship quality (Dwyer, et al., 1987; Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Morgan & Hunt; Palmatier et al., 2006). Levy and Weitz (2004) highlighted how commitment sets relational partnerships apart from functional transactions. In the spectator sport context, commitment can be defined as sport consumers' enduring desire to continue a relationship with a particular sport organization (Ross, James, & Vargas, 2008; Mahony, Madrigal, & Howard, 2000). Commitment has long been emphasized as a key construct to explain the nature of the relationship between sport consumers and a team, and to play a substantial role in the sport consumption decision (Funk & James, 2001; Funk & Pritchard, 2006; Mahony et al., 2000).

Intimacy. Intimacy can be defined as the degree of familiarity, closeness, and openness to relationship partners (Fournier, 1998). Although the term intimacy is often used to refer to sexual feelings and physical contact in romantic relationships, the focus of the current study is on nonsexual dimensions of intimacy, which is in accordance with Fournier's (1998) conceptualization of intimacy. Intimacy has also been recognized as an essential component of relationship quality (Smit, Bronner, & Tolboom, 2007; Swaminathan, Page, & Gürhan-Canli, 2007; Thorbjørnsen, Supphellen, Nysveen, & Pedersen, 2002). Fournier stressed that a successful brand relationship could not be achieved without establishing strong intimacy. Although not using the term intimacy, researchers in sport management

have studied the concepts defining intimacy, such as familiarity, closeness, and openness. These concepts have been reported as vital elements for building a favorable relationship with sport consumers (Harris & Ogbonna, 2008; McDonald & Milne, 1997).

Identification. Fournier (1998) defined self-connection as a “relationship quality facet [that] reflects the degree to which the brand delivers on important identity concerns, tasks, or themes, thereby expressing a significant aspect of self” (p. 364). Self-connection has been identified as a critical component of relationship quality (Smit et al., 2007; Swaminathan et al., 2007; Thorbjørnsen et al., 2002). Strong self-connection activates the protective feelings of uniqueness and dependency, both of which can drive customers to maintain relationships (Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992). Moreover, a strong self-connection discourages customers from defecting from relationships when facing difficult times (Lydon & Zanna, 1990). In the current conceptual framework, self-connection to a brand or firm corresponds to the identification with a team. Both concepts are built upon a conceptual foundation from Stryker’s (1968) identity theory which states the existence of multiple roles assumed by individuals. Team identification has been widely suggested as a pivotal construct to capture the fundamentals of the relationship between sport consumers and a team (Laverie & Arnett, 2000; McDonald & Milne, 1997; Trail, Anderson, & Fink, 2005).

Reciprocity. Reciprocity can be regarded as “internalized beliefs and expectations about the balance of obligations in an exchange relationship” (Palmatier, 2008, p. 77). The crucial role of reciprocity in cultivating strong and successful relationships has been well documented (De Wulf et al., 2001; Miller & Kean, 1997; Palmatier, 2008; Schwarz, Trommsdorff, Albert, & Mayer, 2005). Researchers in sport management have also acknowledged that reciprocity is a main construct characterizing the nature of the relationship between sport consumers and teams (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005; Harris & Ogbonna, 2008). It has been argued that sport consumers want to develop and maintain relationships in which they feel appreciated and valued in return for what they psychologically and financially invest in the team (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005; Harris & Ogbonna, 2008). Furthermore, Howard and Crompton (2004) noted that sport consumers are more likely to defect from a relationship with a team if they perceived the reciprocity in the relationship to be imbalanced.

Structure of Relationship Quality Constructs

It is of particular importance for academics and practitioners alike to understand how the multifaceted arrays of relationship quality constructs are evaluated and structured in the sport consumer’s mind. Although there is no clear consensus in the literature on the causal direction, researchers have consistently suggested that individual

relationship quality constructs closely interact with each other, but still are differentiated (Fournier, 1998; Palmatier et al., 2006). To account for the structure of these highly related but also distinct individual relationship quality constructs, many researchers have proposed hierarchical models hypothesizing that relationship quality is a second-order construct composed of multiple first-order relationship quality constructs (Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990; De Cannière, De Pelsmacker, & Geuens, 2009; De Wulf et al., 2001; Dwyer, et al., 1987; Roberts et al., 2003; Figure 1). Hierarchical models have typically been used to explain the structure of relationship quality factors partly because researchers in disciplines outside statistics are more familiar with the hierarchical approach (Chen, West, & Sousa, 2006). In this study though, a different, less routine approach, was implemented to account for the structure of relationship quality constructs. General-specific models, which provide an alternative approach to hierarchical models in explaining the structure of highly related but distinct constructs, have been proposed in the area of intelligence research (Gustafsson & Balke, 1993; Luo, Pettrill, & Thomson, 1994). This is useful because general-specific models specify a general construct accounting for the commonality of the individual constructs and explicitly define domain specific constructs representing a unique portion of individual constructs.

According to Chen et al.’s (2006) notion, the general-specific approach has the following advantages over a hierarchical approach in some situations. First, general-specific models are theoretically more flexible because they do not require the assumption of the existence of a higher-order factor or a hierarchy between the lower-order factor and higher-order factor. Researchers who have been involved with the relationship quality literature while using a hierarchical model have often failed to provide sufficient theoretical support for the hierarchy assumption. Consequently, this has rendered the validity of hierarchical models as questionable.

Second, researchers who have used hierarchical models typically view the individual relationship quality constructs as mere indicators of a higher-order relationship quality. General-specific models, however, explicitly denote domain specific factors independent from a general or global factor. This parallels a higher-order factor in the hierarchical models. Thus, general-specific models are more consistent than hierarchical models with the literature suggesting that the role of domain specific characteristics of relationship quality should be taken into consideration to best understand the complicated and multifaceted concept of relationship quality (Palmatier, 2008; Palmatier et al., 2006, Fournier, 1998).

Third, a general-specific approach is more useful when empirically examining the relationship between relationship quality and external constructs such as the potential antecedents and consequences of relationship quality. A general-specific approach can easily provide information on the contribution of both the general factor and the domain specific factors to explain external constructs. This contrasts with the hierarchical approach

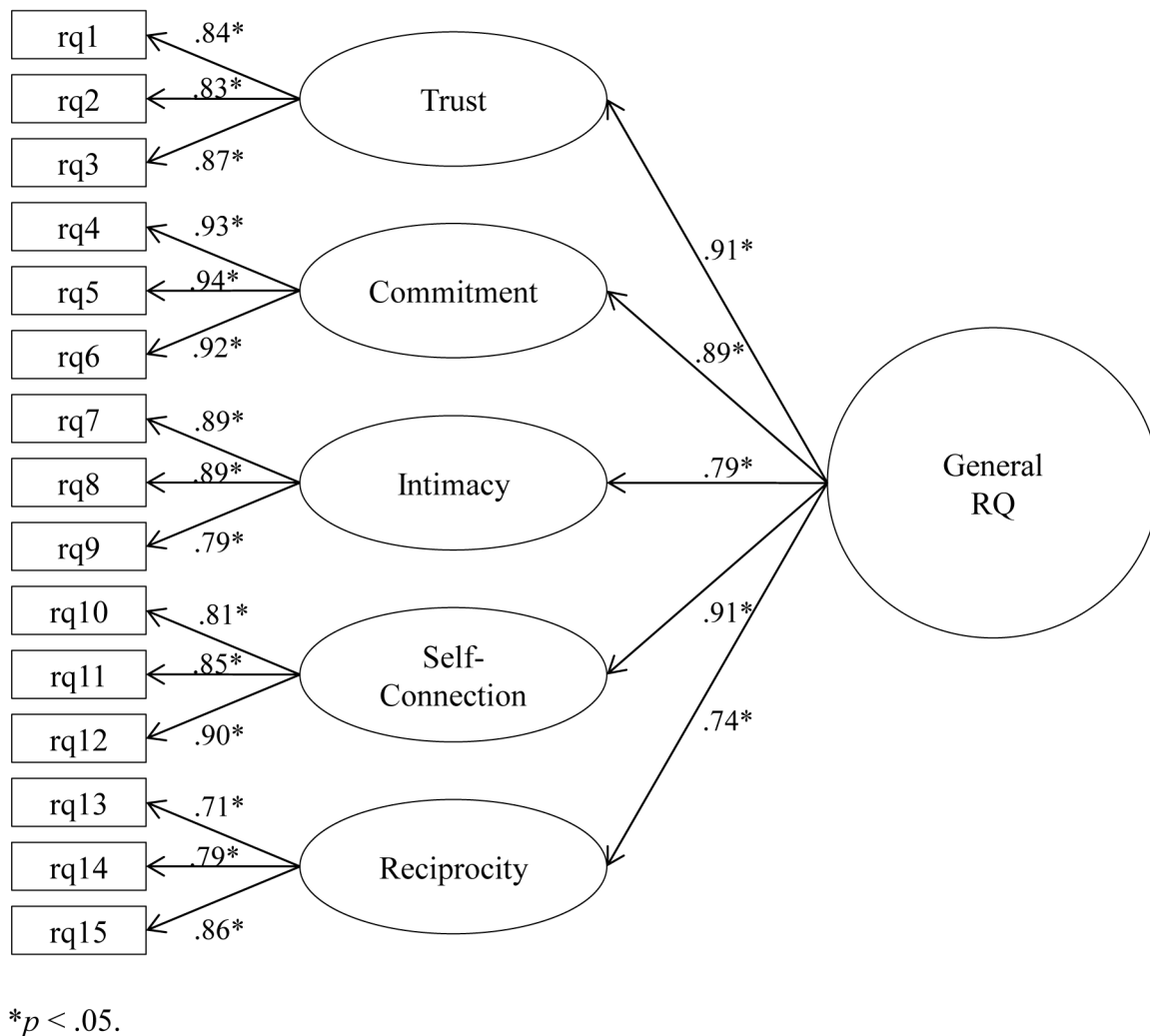


Figure 1 — Second-Order Model of Relationship Quality

because it can only be used to discover the effect of the higher-order factor on the external constructs.

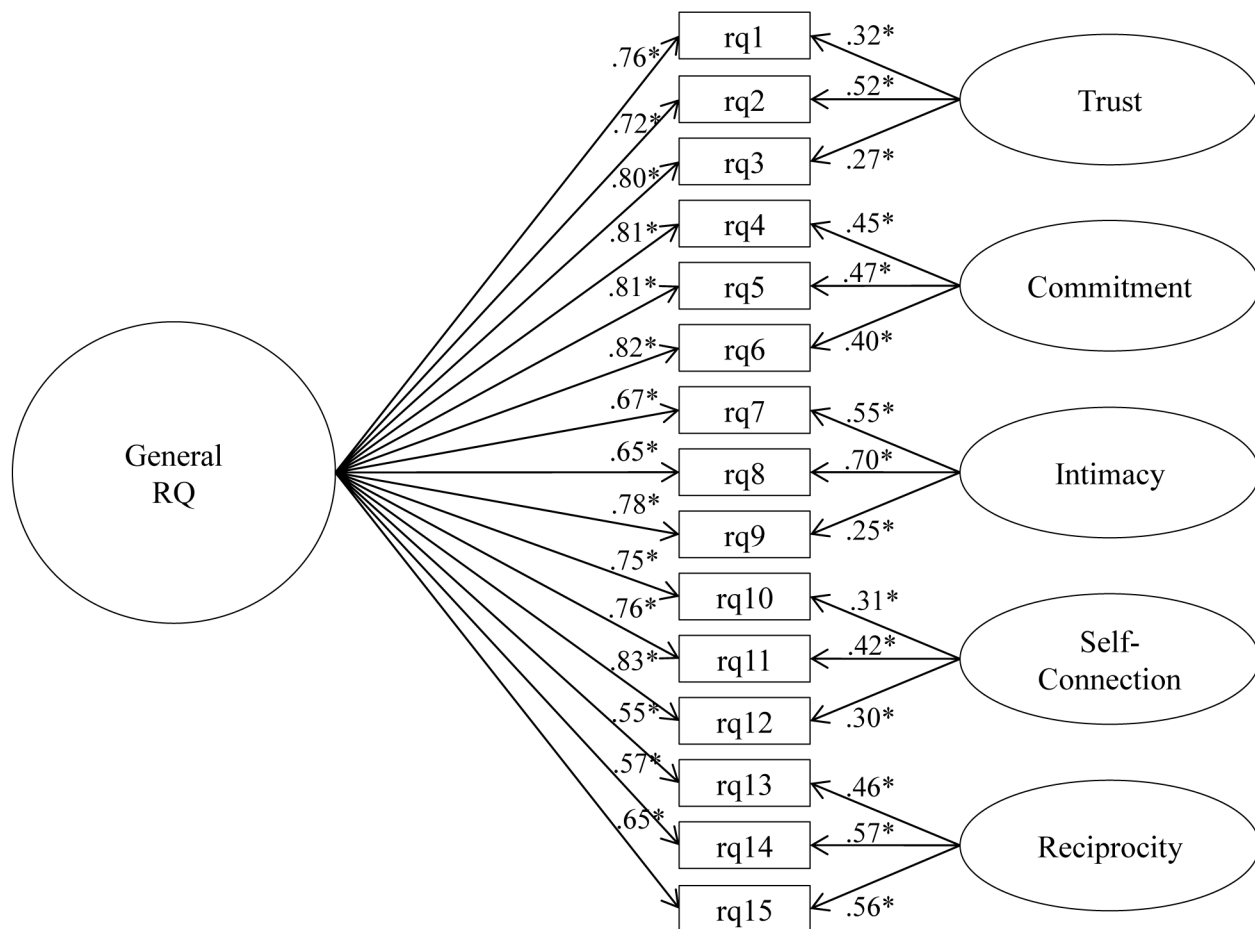
The general-specific model may therefore be a more appropriate approach to represent the structure of the relationship quality constructs in our research. Thus, the general-specific model should be compared with a hierarchical model because they are two plausible alternatives to account for the structural nature of relationship quality constructs based on the literature. In addition, it is typically recommended to compare the research model (i.e., general-specific model) with an alternative model (i.e., hierarchical model) for validating a research model (Iacobucci, Saldanha, & Deng, 2007; MacCallum, Wegener, Uchino, & Fabrigar, 1993; McDonald, 2002). The proposed general-specific model of relationship quality incorporates both a general relationship construct and domain specific factors (Figure 2). The general relationship quality construct represents a common portion of relationship quality and multiple domain-specific

relationship quality factors reflect domain-specific characteristics of relationship quality.

The Influence of Relationship Quality on Behavioral Intentions

In developing the relationship quality framework, it is important to address the influence of relationship quality constructs on various sport consumption behaviors. In their model, Kim and Trail (in press) proposed that there are three behavioral aspects of interest in sport consumer behavior specific to fans and spectators: attendance, sport media consumption, and licensed merchandise consumption.

Attendance. Increasing attendance is one of the most important objectives for sport organizations. Relationship quality has been linked to positively influencing purchase intention and actual purchases. For example, Palmatier



* $p < .05$.

Figure 2 — General-Specific Model of Relationship Quality

et al. (2006) found that relationship quality explained an average of 52% of the variance in purchase intention across more than 50 pieces of empirical research in a consumer products context. In addition, Hennig-Thurau and Klee (1997) reported that relationship quality is a primary driver of repeat purchase behaviors. In the sport consumption behavior realm, relationship quality constructs including trust (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005), identification (Laverie & Arnett, 2000; Trail, Fink, & Anderson, 2003), commitment (Mahony et al., 2000), reciprocity (Hunt, Bristol, & Bashaw, 1999) and intimacy (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998) have been proposed as major predictors of game attendance. Based on these findings, Kim and Trail (in press) proposed that the above-mentioned five sport consumer-team relationship quality constructs would influence attendance intention. Thus, we will test the hypothesis that relationship quality positively influences game attendance intention.

Sport Media Consumption. Sport organizations have become more and more concerned about the media

consumption behavior of their fans. The reason for this concern is sport consumers' media related consumption of the team has crucial implications for the financial success of the organization. Extant relationship quality literature has allowed researchers to suggest that high relationship quality will likely increase behavioral dependence. This increased dependence includes the expansion of the scope, diversity, and frequency of brand-related or firm-related activities (Fournier, 1998). This point can be extended to sport media consumption behaviors. Sport consumers who perceive high relationship quality will increase team related behaviors, including team related media consumption. We therefore hypothesized that relationship quality positively affects sport media consumption intention.

Licensed Merchandise Consumption. Licensed merchandise sales are critical for sport organizations because licensed merchandise is a substantial source of revenue for sport teams and leagues; licensed merchandise also helps sport organizations communicate their brand

identity with their fans. High brand relationship quality can also result in positive attitude brand extensions (Park, Kim, & Kim, 2002). This finding implies that high brand relationship quality encourages consumers to purchase brand extension products. Licensed merchandise can be viewed as brand extensions of the team's brand. In addition, researchers have suggested that one of the major reasons people wear team licensed merchandise is to make their relationship with the team publicly known and validated (Cialdini et al., 1976). Furthermore, Trail et al. (2005) found that identification was related to the likelihood of purchasing the team's merchandise in the future. Kim and Trail (in press) extended these ideas and proposed that sport consumer-team relationship quality is a major predictor of licensed merchandise consumption. Drawing on these findings, and to test Kim and Trail's proposal, we hypothesized that relationship quality will have a positive effect on licensed merchandise consumption intention.

Methods

Participants and Procedures

The study was conducted in the context of collegiate sports and a football team from a Division I Football Bowl Subdivision university was chosen as the focal sport team of the study. The target population for the study was individuals who were affiliated with a southeastern university. The sampling population was chosen because this population is a major part of a collegiate sport team's fan base and an important market segment (Masteralexis, Barr, & Hums, 2009). The sample for the study was drawn using the judgmental sampling method. This method is a type of nonprobability sampling in which researchers choose a sample to be studied based on the researchers' knowledge and judgment about the population, its elements, and the purpose of the study.

Before the data were collected, approval was obtained from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Two major survey modes (face-to-face self-administered and online self-administered surveys) were employed to collect the data. Social science research increasingly uses a mixed-mode design as a way to decrease effects or biases of data collection modes on the survey results while balancing cost (Groves et al., 2004). Face-to-face survey participants were recruited through visiting classes, dining areas, and recreation and sport centers across campus. The potential participants were informed of the purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of participation in the survey. After signing the informed consent, the participants were then given brief instructions on how to properly fill out the survey. On average, the questionnaire took participants 10 min to complete. Participants did not receive compensation for completing the survey. A total of 424 participants filled out the face-to-face self-administered questionnaire.

Online survey participants were recruited by sending an e-mail that included a message to invite the recipient to participate in the online survey and a link to an Internet

website where the survey questionnaire was located. Lists of e-mail addresses were collected from various listservs and the university homepage. The purpose of the study, description of the planned procedure, and brief instructions for completion of the survey, were included in the first part of the questionnaire. Informed consent was obtained by the respondents reading the cover letter and choosing to fill out the survey posted on the Web page. Of 2,077 e-mail recipients, 258 completed and returned the survey. Although the response rate of 12% was relatively low, the first wave of participants and the second wave of participants revealed no significant differences in terms of the mean scores of 22 out of the 24 variables, suggesting that there was no significant nonresponse bias (Armstrong & Overton, 1977). A total of 682 individuals participated in the study. Fifty-one surveys were disqualified due to incomplete information. This resulted in 631 usable surveys. The remaining participants consisted of 246 males (39%) and 385 females (61%). The average age of the participants was 25 years old ranging from 18 to 74 ($M = 25.49$, $SD = 10.24$). The majority of the participants were White (62%), followed by Hispanic (20%), African-American (8%), Asian (7%), and other (3%).

Instrumentation

Measures for Trust (3 items), Commitment (3 items), Identification (3 items), Intimacy (3 items) and Reciprocity (3 items) from the Sport Consumer-Team Relationship Quality scale (Kim, Trail, Woo, & Zhang, 2009) were used. These constructs were deemed to have good psychometric properties: reliability coefficient values ranged from .83 to .95 and Average Variance Extracted values ranged from .62 to .86 (Kim et al., 2009). To measure attendance intention, two items were taken from Trail et al. (2005) and one item from Kwon, Trail, and James (2007). Two items from Fink, Trail, and Anderson (2002) and one item from Trail et al. (2005) were used to measure sport media consumption intention. Three items from Kwon et al. (2007) were modified to measure licensed merchandise consumption intention. The response format for the relationship quality and sport consumption intention was a 7-point Likert-type scale anchored by 1 = *strongly disagree* and 7 = *strongly agree*. Items measuring demographic characteristics of participants were also included in the questionnaire. These questions were included to provide measures of gender, age and ethnicity. To avoid response bias from order effect, the items in each part were randomly placed in their respective order.

Results

Although the data analyzed in this study was reproduced from Kim et al. (2009), the set of variables analyzed in the current study was different than the one in Kim et al. (2009). Specifically, Kim et al. (2009) only included sport consumer-team relationship quality variables. However, the current study incorporated the sport consumption intention variables in addition to sport consumer-team

relationship quality variables. We therefore expected slightly different measurement property results for the relationship quality variables and we also needed to evaluate the measurement properties of the sport consumption behavior variables. Accordingly, a CFA was conducted on all eight proposed constructs and the results reported.

Data Screening and Test of Assumptions

Based on the examination of randomly selected pairs of variables, the linearity assumption appeared to be reasonably well met. The positive sign of the determinant of the input matrix indicated that severe multicollinearity or singularity did not exist. The univariate distribution of 18 out of 24 observed variables however, were significantly ($p < .01$) skewed (skewness ranged from -1.57 to $.14$). In addition, the univariate distribution of all observed variables showed significant kurtosis ranging from $-.97$ – 1.86 . The normalized Mardia's coefficient of skewness and kurtosis were 59.66 and 31.62 respectively. These results indicated a violation to both the univariate and the multivariate normality assumption. Consequently, the Satorra-Bentler (1994) scaling method was adopted. The Satorra-Bentler scaled χ^2 (S-B χ^2) statistic has been shown to be robust to the violation of the normality assumption (Bentler & Yuan, 1999; Curran, West, & Finch, 1996). Accordingly, to conduct χ^2 difference tests, the S-B χ^2 was adjusted using the formula from Satorra and Bentler (2001).

Measurement Model

A CFA was performed to evaluate the measurement model of relationship quality and sport consumption behaviors using Mplus 5.2 (Muthén & Muthén, 2008). The input matrix for the measurement model of relationship quality and sport consumption behavioral intention constructs is available upon request from the first author. The model fit the data (S-B $\chi^2/df = 465.411/224 = 2.077$, RMSEA = $.041$, CFI = $.980$, SRMR = $.033$).

Several researchers have reported that Cronbach's coefficient alpha (α ; Cronbach, 1951) has a tendency to inaccurately reflect the true reliability when a measurement model is not essentially τ -equivalent (Cronbach, 1951; Novick & Lewis, 1967; Osburn, 2000; Raykov, 1997). The fit of the τ -equivalent measurement model was significantly worse than the congeneric model (adjusted S-B $\chi^2_{\text{difference (8)}} = 94.11$), indicating the measurement model was not τ -equivalent (see Graham, 2006, for comparison procedure). Therefore, use of α for the reliability estimator seemed inappropriate and a structural equation modeling method developed by Raykov (1997, 2001) was used to counteract limitations of α . This method is consistent with classical measurement theory of reliability and is applicable to general cases of measures (Graham, 2006). A full technical description of the method is beyond the scope of this paper and further details of the methods can be found in Raykov (1997, 2001) and Graham (2006).

Table 1 includes the factor loadings, AVE, and reliability coefficients of the final measurement model. The

measurement scales showed adequate psychometric properties as indicated by all significant factor loadings in the predicted direction ($p < .05$), AVE values ranging from $.62$ for Reciprocity to $.91$ for Attendance Intention and reliability coefficients ranging from $.83$ for Reciprocity to $.97$ for Attendance Intention. In addition, discriminant validity was established by testing χ^2 -difference between two nested models for each pair of latent factors in which the researchers either constrained the correlation between two factors to be 1.0 (i.e., the two factors are perfectly correlated) or allowed the correlation to be free (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). Correlations for all pairs of latent factors were significantly different from 1.0 , rendering support for discriminant validity. The correlations among the latent variables are presented in Table 2.

General-specific Model and Hierarchical Model

First we tested the general-specific model that specified one general factor of Sport Consumers-Team Relationship Quality and the five domain specific factors: trust, commitment, intimacy, identification, and reciprocity. Next, we tested the second-order factor model. Then we compared the general-specific model to the second-order factor model. Previous researchers have reported that second-order factor models are nested within the general-specific models (Rindskopf & Rose, 1988; Yung, Thissen, & McLeod, 1999). A χ^2 difference test was therefore performed to statistically compare the two alternative models.

The general-specific model yielded good fit for the data (S-B $\chi^2/df = 273.255/75 = 3.643$, RMSEA = $.065$, CFI = $.970$, and SRMR = $.046$). The second-order hierarchical model indicated adequate fit (S-B $\chi^2/df = 396.851/85 = 4.669$, RMSEA = $.076$, CFI = $.953$, and SRMR = $.060$). The χ^2 difference test for comparison of the general-specific model and the second-order factor model was significant (adjusted S-B $\chi^2_{\text{difference (10)}} = 110.39$). Alternate means of comparing nested models such as examining overlapping confidence intervals for fit indices was not possible in this instance because the Satorra-Bentler (1994) scaling method does not provide them. However, the general-specific model appears to fit the data better than the hierarchical model in this case. Thus the general-specific model was chosen for further analysis. As can be seen from Figure 2, all factor loadings for the General Relationship Quality factor were significant. All factor loadings for domain specific factors were significant as well (see Figure 2). From these results, the implication is that the variance of each relationship quality indicators was accounted for by domain specific factors and the general factor of relationship quality factor, in addition to measurement error (Chen et al., 2006).

Simultaneous Equations Model

The hypothesized simultaneous equations model specified a direct path from General Relationship Quality to

Table 1 Factor Loadings (β), Reliability Coefficients (ρ), and Average Variance Extracted Values (AVE)

Scale	Factors and items	λ	S.E.	R	AVE
STRQ	Trust			.88	0.72
	I trust the (Team Name)	.84	0.02		
	The (Team Name) is reliable	.83	0.02		
	I can count on the (Team Name)	.87	0.01		
	Commitment			.95	0.85
	I am committed to the (Team Name)	.93	0.01		
	I am devoted to the (Team Name)	.93	0.01		
	I am dedicated to the (Team Name)	.91	0.01		
	Intimacy			.88	0.74
	I am very familiar with the (Team Name)	.89	0.01		
	I know a lot about the (Team Name)	.90	0.01		
	I feel as though I really understand the (Team Name)	.78	0.02		
	Identification				0.72
	The (Team Name) reminds me of who I am	.82	0.02	.89	
	The (Team Name) image and my self-image are similar in a lot of ways	.84	0.01		
	The (Team Name) and I have a lot in common	.89	0.02		
Reciprocity			.83	0.62	
The (Team Name) unfailingly pays me back when I do something extra for it	.70	0.01			
The (Team Name) gives me back equivalently what I have given them	.78	0.02			
The (Team Name) constantly returns the favor when I do something good for it	.88	0.02			
SCB	Attendance Intention			.97	0.91
	I intend to attend the (Team Name)'s game(s)	.93	0.01		
	The likelihood that I will attend the (Team Name)'s game(s) in the future is high	.98	0.01		
	I will attend the (Team Name)'s game(s) in the future	.95	0.01		
	Media Consumption Intention			.96	0.87
	I will track the news on the (Team Name) through the media (e.g., TV, Internet, Radio, etc.)	.92	0.02		
	I will watch or listen to the (Team Name)'s game(s) through the media (e.g., TV, Internet, Radio, etc.)	.95	0.01		
	I will support the (Team Name) by watching or listening to (Team Name)'s game(s) through the media (e.g., TV, Internet, Radio, etc.)	.93	0.01		
	Licensed Merchandise Consumption Intention			.92	0.89
	I am likely to purchase (Team Name)'s licensed merchandise in the future	.92	0.01		
In the future, purchasing (Team Name) licensed merchandise is something I plan to do	.95	0.01			
In the future, I intend to purchase licensed merchandise representing the (Team Name)	.96	0.01			

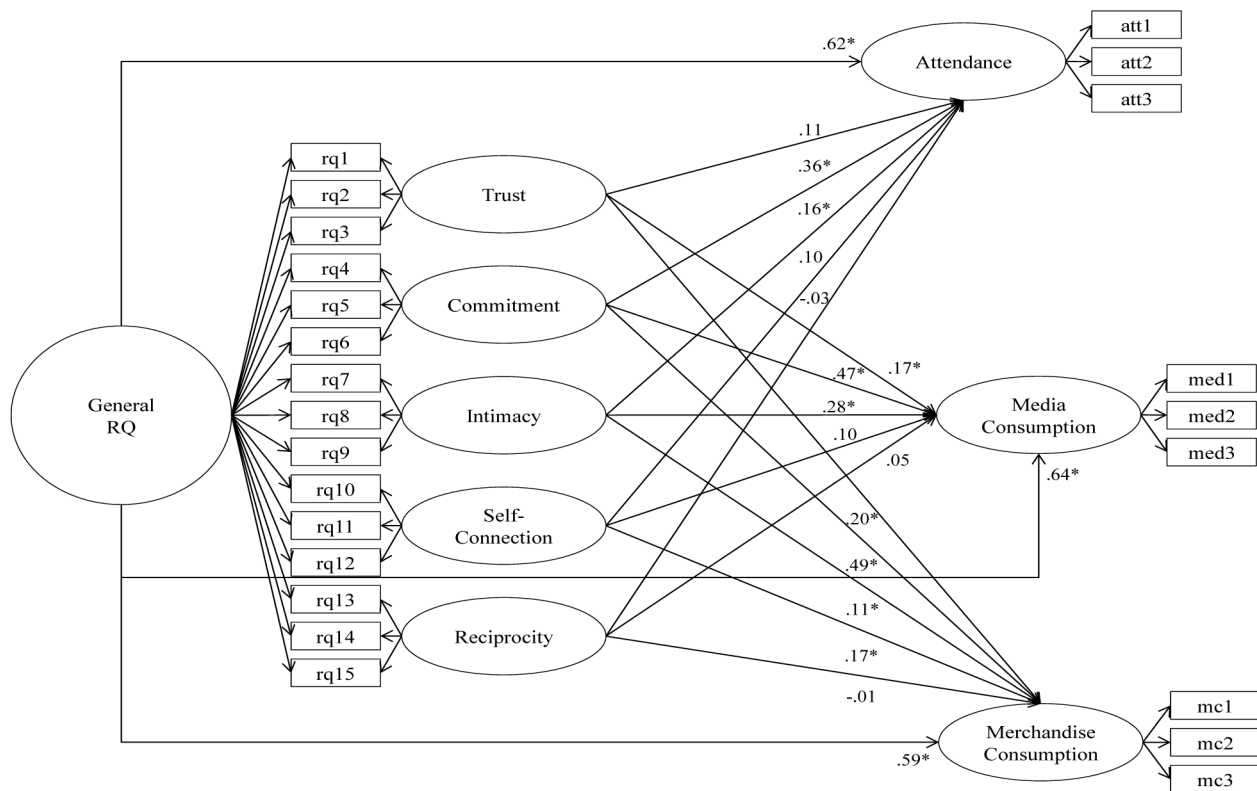
each of three sport consumption behavioral intention factors and a direct path from each of five domain-specific relationship quality factors to each of the sport consumption behavior intention factors (Figure 3). The model fit indices indicated that the simultaneous equation model, which was comprised of one General Relationship

Quality factor, five domain specific relationship quality factors, and three sport consumption behavior intention factors, achieved good fit for the data (S-B $\chi^2/df = 483.715/216 = 2.239$, RMSEA = .044, CFI = .978, and SRMR = .044). Figure 3 presents the path coefficients among the variables in the simultaneous equation model.

Table 2 Correlations Among Relationship Quality Constructs and Sport Consumption Behavior Intentions

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Trust	1.00							
Commitment	.82*	1.00						
Intimacy	.66*	.81*	1.00					
Identification	.83*	.77*	.69*	1.00				
Reciprocity	.72*	.56*	.46*	.79*	1.00			
Attendance Intentions	.59*	.73*	.65*	.56*	.37*	1.00		
Media	.65*	.81*	.74*	.57*	.41*	.71*	1.00	
Merchandise	.62*	.76*	.62*	.55*	.37*	.74*	.80*	1.00

* $p < .05$.



* $p < .05$.

Figure 3 — Hypothesized Simultaneous Equations Model

The direct path from General Relationship Quality to Attendance Intention was significant and explained 38% of variance in Attendance Intention. The direct paths from domain specific Commitment and Intimacy to Attendance Intention were significant and accounted for 13% and

3% of the variance in Attendance Intention respectively. However, the direct paths from domain specific Trust, Identification, and Reciprocity to Attendance Intention were not significant. Overall, General Relationship Quality, domain specific Commitment, and domain specific

Intimacy collectively explained 56% of variance in the Attendance Intention.

The direct path from General Relationship Quality to Sport Media Consumption Intention was significant and explained 41% of variance in Sport Media Consumption Intention. The direct path from domain specific Trust to Sport Media Consumption Intention was significant and accounted for 3% of the variance. The direct path from domain specific Commitment to Sport Media Consumption Intention was significant and explained 22% of the variance. The direct path from domain specific Intimacy to Sport Media Consumption Intention was significant and explained 8% of the variance. However, the direct paths from domain specific Identification and Reciprocity to Sport Media Consumption Intention were not significant. Finally, General Relationship Quality, domain specific Trust, Commitment, and Intimacy collectively explained 76% of variance in Sport Media Consumption Intention.

The direct path from General Relationship Quality to Licensed Merchandise Consumption Intention was significant and explained 35% of the variance. The direct path from domain specific Trust to Licensed Merchandise Consumption Intention was significant and accounted for 4% of the variance. The direct path from domain specific Commitment to Licensed Merchandise Consumption Intention was significant and explained 24% of the variance. The direct path from domain specific Intimacy to Licensed Merchandise Consumption Intention was significant and explained 1% of the variance. The direct path from domain specific Identification to Licensed Merchandise Consumption Intention was significant and explained 3% of the variance. However, the direct path from domain specific Reciprocity to Licensed Merchandise Consumption Intention was not significant. Overall, General Relationship Quality, domain specific Trust, Commitment, Intimacy, Identification collectively explained 66% of variance in Licensed Merchandise Consumption Intention.

Discussion

The main purposes of this investigation were to: (a) identify the key constructs to assess the quality of relationship between sport consumers and team; (b) investigate the cognitive structure of the sport consumer-team relationship quality constructs; and (c) examine the role of the sport consumer-team relationship quality in sport consumption behaviors. The cognitive structure of relationship quality was empirically assessed through comparing a general-specific model (consisting of General Relationship Quality and five domain specific relationship quality factors) to a hierarchical model (consisting of five first-order latent constructs that represented a second-order latent variable of general relationship quality). Although both models fit well, the general-specific model fit slightly better in this data set. This result also provides empirical support for individual constructs reflecting both the dis-

tinct aspect of specific dimensions of relationship quality and the holistic nature of relationship quality (Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000; Fournier, 1996). Thus, sport consumers may make judgments about relationship quality with a team depending on the evaluation of domain specific relationship quality factors (Trust, Commitment, Intimacy, Identification, and Reciprocity) in conjunction with a general or common relationship quality construct (Rindskopf & Rose, 1988). The proposed general-specific model in this study presents a theoretically and empirically sound conceptualization of relationship quality in the context of spectator sport.

General Relationship Quality

The behavioral outcomes of sport consumer-team relationship quality were investigated by performing a simultaneous equations model hypothesizing a relationship between the sport consumer-team relationship quality constructs and the sport consumption behavior intention constructs. Results from the simultaneous equations model indicate that General Relationship Quality significantly influenced all three sport consumption behavioral intentions. First, with regard to Attendance Intention, our finding is consistent with the previous research finding that relationship quality is an essential antecedent of purchase intention and actual purchase (Hennig-Thurau & Klee, 1997; Palmatier et al., 2006; Reynolds & Beatty, 1999). Second, with respect to Sport Media Consumption Intention, our result confirms Fournier's (1996) finding that relationship quality was a major predictor of behavioral dependence. Fournier found that customers who perceived a high quality relationship with a brand or company not only purchased more products from the brand or the company, but also expanded their scope, diversity, and frequency of brand-related or company-related activities. This behavioral dependence might explain the finding from the current study that showed the fans who perceived a higher level of relationship quality with a sport team were more likely to consume the team-related media content.

Third, with regard to Licensed Merchandise Consumption, our results support Trail et al.'s (2005) finding and Park et al.'s (2002) research that a higher level of relationship quality resulted in a more positive attitude toward brand extensions (i.e., consumers who perceived good relationship quality were more likely to buy products using the same brand name). The current study includes evidence that sport consumers who perceived good relationship quality have a greater intention to buy team licensed products. Lastly, we find relationship quality has a substantial impact on sport consumption behavioral intention as evidenced by the large amount of variance in all three sport consumption behavioral intentions explained by General Relationship Quality. This supports the research of Palmatier et al. who reported that relationship quality explained an average of 52% of the variance in purchase intention and Fournier (1996) who suggested that brand relationship quality was a better

predictor of purchase intention than brand attitude and/or satisfaction because brand relationship quality accounted for 61% of variance in purchase intention, while brand attitude and satisfaction accounted for 37% and 52% of the variance in purchase intention, respectively. Thus, it can be concluded that the role of relationship quality in sport consumption decisions is comparable to, if not more critical than, more generally used constructs to explain sport consumption decisions.

Domain Specific Factors

Trust. Evaluating effects of domain specific Trust on sport consumption behavior intentions show that the domain specific Trust significantly affects Sport Media Consumption Intention and Team Licensed Merchandise Consumption Intention. This finding is in line with the previous research in various areas suggesting that trust is an essential relationship quality construct and it is a significant predictor of various consumer behavior variables such as cooperation, dependence acquiescence, and purchasing (Bart, Shankar, Sultan, & Urban, 2005; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Hewett & Bearden, 2001; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Schlosser, White, & Lloyd, 2006). This finding emphasizes that sport organizations should not lose sight of the importance of trust in building a successful relationship with sport consumers. Furthermore, our findings suggest that it is critical for sport organizations to identify the influential determinants of trust and to develop a marketing strategy that will most effectively create and improve sport consumers' trust in the sport organization.

Interestingly, domain specific Trust did not significantly predict unique variance in Attendance Intention. A potential mechanism underlying the nonsignificant effect of domain specific Trust on Attendance Intention is that a number of available alternatives in sport consumers' consideration set might moderate the impact of trust on sport consumption behavior decisions. According to functionalist theory (Grayson, Johnson, & Chen, 2008), trust becomes salient when there are multiple available alternatives in the consideration set and it is needed to serve the function of ranking the available options and making an optimal choice. That is, trust is less relevant to consumer decision-making when only one option is considered. Therefore, for our respondents, it appears that domain-specific trust is a relevant factor for consumption decisions on team related media and team licensed merchandise because, for both consumption decisions, multiple alternatives in the same product category can be considered. For example, several college football games are televised at the same time and there are licensed products of many different college teams in the stores. However, trust is not activated for attendance decisions because the game of the focal team is only practical option in the college football category.

Commitment. Our results show that domain specific Commitment significantly influences all three sport consumption behavioral intentions. That is, the sports consumers who have a stronger commitment to the team are more likely to attend the team's games, consume team related media, and purchase team licensed merchandise. This finding confirms the previous research findings in different fields that the customers who are more committed to a relationship have a greater tendency to purchase the relational partners' products (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Mahony et al., 2000; Palmatier et al., 2009). One noteworthy implication for the finding is that the sport consumption behaviors driven by commitment are expected to continue for a relatively long time because commitment is characterized by its enduring and long-term nature (Cook & Emerson, 1978; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Thus, once sport consumers develop the belief that the relationship with the team is worth the effort to maintain it, the sport consumers actively seek to remain consistent with their belief and to maintain the relationship with the team through constant efforts including regularly attending games, habitually following team related media on a daily basis, and repeatedly purchasing team licensed merchandise.

Domain specific Commitment accounted for the largest amount of variance in Attendance Intention (13%) among domain specific constructs. However, Commitment still explained considerably less variance in Attendance Intention than did General Relationship Quality (38%), the global, higher-order latent construct composed of the five relational constructs. This finding provides empirical support for the notion that no single relational construct can better predict consumption behavior than General Relationship Quality (Crosby et al., 1990; De Wulf et al., 2001; Palmatier et al., 2006). Overall, our findings suggest that the true nature of the relationship between relationship quality and consumption behavior can be best understood by assessing both General Relationship Quality, which captures the overall effect of relationship quality on consumption behaviors, and domain specific factors, which isolate the unique effects of individual relational constructs.

Intimacy. Our results demonstrate that when psychological familiarity, closeness, and openness between sport consumers and the team exist, sport consumers are more likely to attend games, follow team related information through media, and purchase team licensed merchandise. This is consistent with previous research suggesting that intimacy is closely related to various consumer behavior variables including behavioral dependency, evaluation of brand extension, and purchasing (Fournier, 1996; Palmatier et al., 2006; Ramani & Kumar, 2008). Our results are also in line with the previous research finding that intimacy influences various consumption behaviors as a component of overall relationship quality but it also has a unique impact

on consumption behaviors as an individual construct (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Palmatier et al., 2006; Smit et al., 2007; Swaminathan et al., 2007).

Overall, the current research conceptually and empirically supports that a high level of intimacy is an essential component of successful relationship marketing (De Wulf et al., 2001; Fletcher et al., 2000; Fourmier, 1998). Therefore, the inclusion of intimacy into the sport consumer-team relationship marketing framework seems compelling. In the sport marketing context, intimacy can be developed through open communication and active interaction with individual sport consumers. Such efforts for personalized and interactive communication with sport consumers are particularly important in the current marketing environment because new electronic media and the advancement of information technology have greatly changed the way the customers communicate information and this change creates higher consumer expectations for personalized and interactive communication (Keller, 2009).

Identification. Our results indicate that domain specific Identification is significantly linked to Licensed Merchandise Consumption Intention but not significantly related to Media Consumption Intention or Attendance Intention. This finding can be explained by the social nature of sport spectating. As distinguished from consuming team licensed merchandise, attending a game and watching on television involves social activities (Armstrong, 2007). Spectator sport provides a platform for interacting with others whom individuals like or often with whom individuals identify. This social interaction is considered to be a key motive for sport spectating (Sloan, 1989; Trail & James, 2001). Our results imply that domain specific Identification is not related to the motive to socially interact with others through attending or watching sporting events. Rather, it is associated with the motive to claim and publicize their connection with the successful team through using team licensed merchandise (Cialdini et al., 1976). Thus, domain specific identification appears to be more important for merchandise consumption decisions than for attendance or media consumption decisions.

With regard to the nonsignificant effect of domain-specific Identification on Attendance Intention and Sport Media Consumption, the multidimensional nature of identity as a fan deserves further discussion. Each identity may consist of multiple subidentities (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). This suggests that identity as a fan of a sport team is composed of multiple subidentities as well (Trail, Robinson, Dick, & Gillentine, 2003). These subidentities are self-conceptions and self-definitions of a fan of the sport team. In the current study, the self-conceptions of fan of the focal team could be a partner, supporter, student, employee and so forth. These subidentities guide behaviors but only behaviors that were germane to the essential characteristics of the individual subidentities

(Mead, 1934; Stryker, 1968; Arnett, German, & Hunt, 2003). These different roles of multiple subidentities might provide an account of why General Relationship Quality significantly influenced Attendance Intention but domain-specific Identification did not. Subidentities such as a partner and supporter of the team are reflected in General Relationship Quality and these subidentities are deemed naturally related to attendance behavior. Therefore, these subidentities as components of General Relationship Quality motivate Attendance Intention. However, subidentities such as student and employee are reflected in domain-specific Identification and these subidentities might not be pertinent to the attendance behaviors. Hence, these subidentities as components of domain-specific Identification do not significantly influence Attendance Intention.

Reciprocity. Domain specific Reciprocity explained no variance in any of three behavioral intention dimensions. However, the importance of Reciprocity should not be disregarded solely based on this result. First, the General Relationship Quality construct represents the commonality shared among individual relationship quality constructs (e.g., Chen et al., 2006). Our results show that General Relationship Quality has a substantial impact on all three sport consumption intentions. Our results also indicate that the items representing Reciprocity are comprised of this shared commonality (i.e., General Relationship Quality), indicated by the significant factor loadings of the reciprocity items on the General factor. Therefore, the results support that Reciprocity is a key relationship quality construct sharing commonality with other relationship quality constructs. In addition, the results also provide evidence that Reciprocity is a key predictor of important sport consumption behaviors in that General Relationship Quality, of which the Reciprocity items are a component, has a strong impact on sport consumption behaviors.

Second, the purpose of the path analysis in this study is not to maximize the overall predictive power of the model, rather it is to better explain the nature of the relationship between the relationship quality constructs and the sport consumption behaviors. Therefore, selection of constructs solely based on the increment in overall predictive power is not recommended, especially contingent solely on one sample. In addition, the bivariate correlations among independent variables as well as bivariate correlations between independent variables and dependent variables should be considered in their selection. Furthermore, the theoretical basis for inclusion also needs to be evaluated. Although domain specific Reciprocity did not add predictive power controlling for other constructs in the analysis, Reciprocity has strong bivariate factor correlations with the other relationship quality constructs and sport consumption behavior constructs (see Table 2), which is consistent with the literature on reciprocity (De Wulf et al., 2001; Eyuboglu & Buja, 1993; Miller &

Kean, 1997; Palmatier, 2008; Schwarz et al., 2005). These results provide empirical support that Reciprocity is an important relationship quality construct and predictor of sport consumption behaviors.

Third, our finding suggests that each domain specific factor might be related to some consumption behaviors more than others. That is, it is plausible that domain specific Reciprocity might be a meaningful predictor of behavioral intention dimensions that are not included in this study. For example, domain specific Reciprocity might be a critical precursor of donations to sport organizations, especially considering that feelings of reciprocity significantly affect motives for charitable giving (Dawson, 1988). Therefore, the role of domain specific Reciprocity could be better understood by further exploring its relationship with donation behavior as well as additional expected behavioral outcomes.

Implications

In this study, a conceptual model of relationship quality was empirically tested and validated to better understand sport consumer-team relationship quality and its influence on sport consumption behaviors. This study makes a contribution to the current literature in a number of ways. First, we investigated the cognitive structure of relationship quality perceived by sport consumers toward a team and found empirical evidence supporting the proposition that Trust, Commitment, Intimacy, Identification, and Reciprocity are essential components constituting sport consumer-team relationship quality. Each construct reflects a distinct aspect of relationship quality but also the common nature of relationship quality. The five relationship quality constructs will help researchers capture the nature of the sport consumer-team relationship. On one hand, each individual relationship quality construct with its own characteristics separates the unique conceptual dimension of relationship quality from the complex and possibly vague concept of relationship quality. On the other hand, the General Relationship Quality construct, which is an amalgamation of multiple dimensions, is more holistic and captures the overall strength of the psychological bonds between sport consumers and the team.

Second, this study provides an empirical examination of a relationship marketing framework in the sport consumption context. While the current studies on relationship marketing that exist in the sport management area have advanced the conceptual understandings of relationship marketing, few studies empirically examined relationship marketing theories applied to the relationship between sport organizations and their relationship partners. Moreover, the authors found no previous empirical investigation of any aspect of relationship quality in a sport consumption behavior context. This study provides empirical support for previous theoretical propositions suggesting that the relationship metaphor would be applicable to sport consumer behaviors and that relationship quality would be a critical predictor of sports consumption behavioral intentions. Hence, these empirical find-

ings improve our understanding of relationship marketing and relationship quality in a sport consumption context.

Finally, this study contributes to the cumulative knowledge in sport management and relationship marketing. The conceptual framework tested in this study builds on previous research on relationship quality, which is a central concept in the relationship marketing literature (Fournier, 1998; Roberts et al., 2003; Smit et al., 2007). Given the paucity of research on relationship quality in the sport management realm, this study enriches sport management literature by adding an application of a relationship marketing theory (relationship quality) and empirical validation to the research on sport consumer behavior. This study also augments the relationship marketing literature by validating unique characteristics of sport consumer-team relationship quality while empirically reaffirming the beneficial effects of relationship quality on consumption within a sport consumer behavior context.

This study also has several managerial implications. First, the empirically validated framework is helpful for sport marketers who want guidance in understanding and improving their relationships with sport consumers. The model highlights the central components of sport consumer-team relationship quality that must be monitored and managed to successfully establish, maintain, and enhance good relationships with sport consumers. By identifying the key relational constructs, the framework provides a roadmap for sport marketers to prioritize the focal points of relationship marketing.

Second, this study empirically supports the widely-held assumption in practice that a good relationship with sport consumers is a critical factor for a successful sport business. Managerial decisions based on the allocation of resources for relationship marketing depend on its capability to yield meaningful performance outcomes. Sport managers need to know that the payoff obtained from the investment in relationships with their consumers is valuable. As found in this study, when sport consumers perceive they have a good relationship with a sport team, they intend to attend more games, buy more team licensed merchandise, and consume sport content related to the team through media. Moreover, the strength of the association between relationship quality and sport consumption intentions was substantial. In sum, these results indicate the value of establishing good relationships with sport consumers. These relationships are crucial factors in managerial decision making and, therefore, justify considerable effort and investment to build and maintain strong consumer relationships.

Third, this study also provides sport managers with essential insights for human resource management. Due to the nature of the sport product as a service, the interactions between employees and sport consumers play a major role in determining the quality of the teams' relationship with their customers. For this reason, when hiring personnel, managers need to consider if the candidates have the capability to properly interact with their consumers. By incorporating the relationship marketing

framework in training programs, the managers can help staff understand the importance of the relationship with the consumers and perform activities related to relationship development. In addition, managers need to keep motivating their employees to actively engage in the process because it will better enable them to develop and maintain good consumer relationships.

Limitation and Future Research

Although this study has provided valuable insight into understanding relationship quality, there are some limitations that should be considered for future research. First, although data were not collected entirely from students, the majority of the participants in this study were college students. This might limit the generalizability of the findings from this study. In addition, the context of this study, a college football team, might also limit the generalizability of the findings. Therefore, the generalizability of the findings could be improved by using broader and wider sampling frames in various sport contexts (e.g., professional football and women's basketball) for future studies.

Next, deciding which specific constructs and measures should be used to best predict actual sport consumption behavior has been a major issue. Using intention as a measure to predict or explain actual behavior in this study can be justified by the following theoretical and practical reasons. First, many theoretical frameworks of consumer behavior have conceptualized that intention is a proximate psychological construct for actual behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Warshaw, 1980). Second, utilizing intention as a proxy of behavior is also justified because it is a practical alternative to actual behaviors. Third, there are reliable forecasting models to convert intention to actual behavior that are now easily available. Nevertheless, it is generally admitted that participants' self-reported intention does not always accurately forecast their future behavior and the strength of relationship between self-reported intention and the actual behavior is considerably influenced by several factors (Morwitz, Steckel, & Gupta, 2007). Therefore, a longitudinal study is one approach which can provide stronger evidence for the predictive capability of relationship quality regarding actual sport consumption behaviors.

Finally, this study used behavioral intention measures (i.e., attendance, media consumption, and merchandise consumption) focused on a general time frame. That is, the behavioral intention measures used in this study were not limited to a specific time frame (e.g., the next season). The main purpose of this study was to better understand the influence of relationship quality constructs on behavioral intentions in general or over a broad time period rather than a specific time period and the general measures used in this study served the purpose adequately. However, future researchers or managers whose primary purpose is to predict actual attendance in a specific time period might find time-specific measures more useful for the purpose. For example, Dan Gilbert, the majority owner of Cleveland Cavaliers might want

to know the impact of LeBron James' departure on the fan-team relationship and ticket sales in the 2010–2011 season. Then, time-specific measures should be used to better predict attendance in that particular season.

The extant literature and research findings from this study identify several interesting avenues for future research. These avenues of inquiry provide sport management researchers ample opportunities. These include, but are not limited to, the investigation of the following questions:

- Is there a sequential order among relationship quality constructs?
- If a sequential order exists, how are the relationship quality constructs grouped and arranged in the hierarchy?
- What are the most effective strategies to improve relationship quality?
- What potential moderators affect the nature of the link between relationship quality and sport consumption behaviors?
- What are potential mediators that intervene in the connection between relationship quality and its outcomes?
- What are the antecedents and other outcomes of relationship quality?

Researchers are encouraged to explore the questions above to provide a better understanding of the nature of the relationship between team and sport consumers, and the impact of the relationship on various sport consumption behaviors.

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