Fan Loyalty: Investigating the Emotional and Cognitive Responses of AFL Fans and Fanatics

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Abstract
The AFL is one of the largest sporting organisations in Australia and has in excess of 650,000 members. There has been speculation on the types of members that a sporting organisation may have, from casual members to fanatical members. This research identifies and then proposes these fanatical members are different to non-fanatical members. The research investigates this proposition using Magnetoencephalography (MEG) to test the brain activity of fanatical members and non-fanatical members, to see if the different fans process information differently. It is proposed that an understanding of information processing will allow for better design of segmentation and marketing communications to members.

Introduction
In 2012, with 18 clubs from across the country, the now-named Australian Football League (AFL) is worth over $343 million in revenue alone (AFL, 2011). The AFL holds the majority share of television and live audiences of sporting leagues in the country (McDonald, 2010), and in 2011 signed a $1.2 billion agreement with the Seven Network, Foxtel and Telstra to broadcast matches between 2011-2016. With over 650,000 members recorded in 2011, the AFL also has the largest population of season-ticket holders of any sport in Australia (AFL, 2011). Season-ticket holders (STHs) provide direct income to sporting clubs through the tickets they purchase, often equating to one third or more of the total club revenue (Wakefield, 2006). From a marketing perspective STHs are an important asset as the number of ticket-holders is often predictable in advance of the season, providing a quantifiable audience that can be exposed to targeted promotional communication (McDonald, 2010).

There is a limited understanding regarding which elements of the sporting institutions influence the attitudinal and behavioural drivers of AFL fans to support their clubs, not only through membership, but also through rigorous attendance to games and above-average physical allegiance (McDonald, 2010). The factors that help build fan loyalty have been the subject of research (see Bauer et al., 2008; Funk and James, 2006; Heere and Dickson, 2008), however there is still a need for further investigation of the socialisation agents that are most influential in becoming an Australian sport fan, the regularity of popular fan-related behaviours, and the degree to which Australians identify with the role of the sport fan and their favourite teams (Melnick and Wann, 2010).

Worthington, Russell-Bennet and Hartel (2010) proposed a tricomponent model of loyalty. Partnering this theory with the available neuroimaging technology of magnetoencephalography (MEG), this study aims to identify the emotional and cognitive characteristics of loyalty in AFL fans and fanatics.
Customer Loyalty

Loyal customers are considered key contributors to organisational profitability and success (Ferrand, Robinson, and Valette-Florence, 2010) and understanding the psychological processes that are behind customer decisions is an important topic of research (Braeutigam, Rise, Swithenby and Ambler, 2004). From a marketing perspective, past studies have shown that there is no universally accepted definition of loyalty (Cheng, 2011; Dick and Basu, 1994; Park and Kim, 2000). Instead, it is often conceptualised in two ways:

1. Loyalty as primarily an attitude that leads to a relationship with the brand.
2. Loyalty is primarily expressed in terms of revealed behaviour (i.e. the pattern of previous or past purchases).

This two-dimensional approach to loyalty has been a dominant theory of past studies (Day, 1969; Gahwiler and Havitz, 1998; Park, 1996). Studies have argued that behavioural and attitudinal loyalties are separate constructs and do a poor job of predicting loyalty outcomes (East, Gendall, Hammond and Lomax, 2005) where others have contended that the two are interrelated and provide an accurate framework for analysing the bond between customer and brand (Uncles, Dowling and Hammond, 2003). Worthington et al. (2010) proposed a tri-dimensional approach, splitting attitudinal loyalty into the two sub-components of emotional and cognitive loyalties. Combining this adaptation with the current advancements in neurological and psychological testing technologies, allows researchers to measure loyalty more accurately than ever before.

This concept could also be said to stems from research by Oliver (1999) and Uncles et al. (2003), whose theories state that in order to increase repeat purchase behaviour and ultimately loyalty, the customer’s cognitive and emotional commitment to the brand must first be addressed. When discussing loyalty in the context of sport, cognitive thoughts, emotions and behavior are the key indicators of fan loyalty (Funk and Pastore, 2000; Funk and James, 2006).

Attitudinal Loyalty

It has been argued that in order for ‘true’ loyalty to exist, there must be a strong attitudinal commitment between the customer and the brand (Day, 1969; Heere and Dickson, 2008; Reichheld, 1996; Whan Park et al., 2010). Attitudinal loyalty, which explains consumer identification with a product or brand, is based on the idea that loyalty is a highly developed attitude that is persistent, resistant to change, creates biases in cognitive processing and provides a general guide to emotion and behaviour (Funk and James, 2006). The more positively disposed individuals are towards a brand, the more likely they are to strengthen and maintain a relationship with it (Mahony et al., 2000), and this increases the likelihood of responding to related advertising messages, sharing positive affirmations such as word-of-mouth, and ultimately continuing to purchase the good or service. From a sporting perspective, fans with strong attitudinal loyalty towards a team stand firm when their team performs poorly on the field, transfer their allegiance to team sponsors, and are more likely to purchase merchandise (Neale and Funk, 2006).

Measuring a sporting fan’s attitudinal loyalty towards a particular sporting club/brand has been a difficult task for researchers so far, with considerable research conducted on behavioural loyalties such as attendance at sporting events and the purchase of season-long memberships (Hall, O’Mahony and Vieceli, 2010; Shamir and Ruskin, 1984; Worthington et al., 2010).

Emotional Loyalty
Emotional loyalty relates to the positive feelings evoked by purchasing a good or service, and the sense of emotional connection towards the brand resulting from that initial purchase (Worthington et al., 2010). High emotional responses towards a brand are often evoked when attachment is strong, given that emotions are inherent to an individual’s identification and connection processes (Whan Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich and Iacobucci, 2010).

Cognitive Loyalty
Cognitive loyalty is a consumer’s psychological preference for a brand, consisting of positive thoughts and beliefs about purchasing a product or service on the next purchase occasion (Hartel, Russell-Bennett, Lloyed and Russell, 2008). Through marketing research, cognitive loyalty has been identified as one of four components of loyalty, with the others being affective loyalty, behavioral loyalty and behavioral intention (Gremler and Brown, 1998; Oliver, 1999). Hartel et al., (2008) contended that emotional and cognitive loyalties are not stages that occur in a progressive but components of loyalty that can co-occur.

Behavioural Loyalty
Models of behavioural loyalty are primarily defined by patterns of brand allegiance, or the expenditure of purchases towards a brand over a period of time (Fader and Hardie, 1996; Kahn et al., 1988; Uncles et al., 2003; Worthington et al., 2010). In a sporting context, attending live sporting events and purchasing team memberships and merchandise exemplify behavioural loyalty. Although behavioural patterns such as repeat attendance to sporting events may be the most evident manifestation of an individual’s attachment to a team, it ignores the underlying emotional and cognitive process that help explain the original motivation, as well as the cause for any deviation to attendance behaviour or association with the team (Mahony et al., 2000).

Identification Theory
Identification theory is used to examine individual group identity with well-developed propositions and strong empirical support (Lin and Lin, 2008). Brands often serve as symbolic devices, affording the consumer a public personality or culture with which to identify and project his or her own self-image through an affiliation or relationship with the brand (Reizbos, 2003), which can really strengthen a consumer’s connection with particular brands (Crosby and Taylor, 1983). Additionally, individuals are motivated to identify with an organization that presents qualities similar to their own self-concept and to commit themselves to activities that support the organization (Cornwell and Coote, 2005; Dutton and Dukerick, 1991). If consumers identify publicly with an AFL team, or feel that the brand/team is consistent with their core values and beliefs, they are more likely to reflect that through their purchase behaviour and support of the team. Team identification has various definitions, the most common being the extent to which an individual perceives the psychological link between themselves and their preferred sport team, to such an extent that they may even consider the successes and failures of the team as their own personal experiences (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Wann, 1997).

Porat (2010) identified a football fan as one whose devotion to a preferred club dominates his entire way of life. The identification he has with his preferred team is a permanent component in the fan’s identity profile.Fans are often willing to attend games even during seasons of poor performance, withstand criticism from other supporters, and donate their time and money to express their support for a particular club (Wakefield and Sloan, 1995).

Fanaticism
Because fanaticism is a concept that appears in a variety of domains and contexts (religious, movies, sports, music), it has no ‘single’ definition. Instead, research has provided a two-
tiered framework of fanaticism that can be applied across industries; fans and fanatics (Porat, 2010; Smith, Fisher and Cole, 2007). According to Reysen and Branscombe (2010), any individual who is an enthusiastic, passionate and loyal admirer of an interest can reasonably be called a ‘fan’. By virtue of its definition, a fanatic is often someone who is extreme; who lies outside the normal or accepted range of behaviour, in his or her devotion to a cause, religion, team or even a brand (Smith et al., 2007). Fanatics tend to be those fans that identify their fandom as integral to his or her way of life. As Porat (2010) described in the context of football, a fanatic believes “football is his life” (p. 284).

Truly loyal fans, or ‘fanatics’ possess a deep emotional connection with their favourite sport or team, and demonstrate this attachment through years of membership and season-ticket purchases, and withstand criticism from others or poor team/player results (Dees et al., 2010). Fanatics demonstrate the highest degree of attendance loyalty at sporting events, displaying intense emotional responses and strong positive attitudes towards a sporting individual or team (Hall et al., 2010). For fanatic supporters, the relationship with their preferred team has become a significant and central part of their lives, and as a result they are much less likely to alter their behaviour or level of commitment (Mahony et al., 2000). In some cases the significance of the sporting team to the individual can dictate the characteristics of their social and familial relationships (Porat, 2010).

**Research Aims**

The purpose of this research is to consider cognitive and emotional differences between fanatics and regular fans. The central aims of this study are to:

a. Identify the properties and characteristics of fanatic AFL supporters
b. To understand the emotional, behavioural and cognitive drivers behind fanatic behaviour
c. Compare the emotional, behavioural and attitudinal drivers against those of ‘regular’ members.

The central research question that this study aims to address is ‘What are the emotional and cognitive differences between fanatical AFL supporters and regular fans?’

This research investigates the role of emotions and cognitive processes in the processing of information for fans and fanatics. It is proposed that fanatics will process information at a higher emotional level due to the level of attachment to the brand and the teams. It is proposed that fanatics may have more emotional attachment to information relating to teams and to individual players from the team that they support. Non-fanatical fans may process information in a different manner due to the lower emotional attachment and this may mean that the football clubs need to treat these groups as different.

**Research Design**

The design of the proposed research is centred on the brain imaging technology of MEG, which is a non-invasive and non-hazardous form of imaging technology used to measure magnetic fields generated by small intracellular currents in neurons of the brain (MCBI, 2005). MEG allows researchers to detect sequential brain activity much more accurately and in more detail than ever before. The range of an MEG scan generates a map of the analysing neural activity within milliseconds of it occurring (Vecchiato et al., 2011). Using MEG, we allow the researchers to track responses to both control and experimental stimuli, and recognise the regions of the brain that are involved in the processes of decision-making, emotion, behaviour and more.

**Sample**

The research objectives of this study call for respondents with fanatic behaviours or attitudes towards a preferred AFL club. Fanatics have been identified through a previous phase of the
study using qualitative research and snowball sampling. Using snowball sampling, approximately 30 respondents will be recruited. Previous research has shown, the majority of ‘high-level’, or ‘fanatic’ supporters or sporting clubs tend to be young males (Shank & Beasley, 1998), it is a priority of the sampling process to ensure that there is a diverse range of respondents in terms of age and gender.

Data are to be collected using an Elekta TRIUX MEG under the supervision of qualified staff. Respondents will be shown images (still and moving) of various teams and players (a mixture of players from the team that the individual supports and from opposition teams), and brain activity will be measured whilst respondents are viewing these pictures. It is expected that there will be a different brain response in the fanatics compared to the regular fans. The data are to be analysed using SP8 in MATLAB (see Litvak et al., 2011 for a review).

**Conclusion and Contribution**

Although the methodologies for identifying consumer loyalties are many, the research conducted so far has left some limitations and inconsistencies in the wake of future studies. This research has the ability to inform segmentation and communication practices for membership organisations, which, in many instances, use the fanatic member as a spokesperson for communication. Understanding the way in which information is processed by different member types will allow for better communications with members. The academic contribution will be a test of the emotional and cognitive processing aspects of loyalty, and some initial data showing the manner of information processing for different types of members. Using MEG will allow a scientific confirmation of emotions and cognitive responses on behalf of the consumers, and also will address differences between fanatics and non-fanatical fans.

Anecdotally, it is known that fanatics and non-fanatic members do not wish to be associated with the other group due to the perceived levels of attachment and roles that the fans play within the club. Currently, sporting clubs use fanatical fans in promotional literature, and this may have a detrimental effect on the recruitment of non-fanatical fans and casual fans, who many not wish to associate with this image.

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