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Sports fan detachment: An exploration of the dissolution process

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ABSTRACT

In the sports industry, media rights, sponsorships and gate revenues are the predominant engines for growth and are based on the support of loyal fans that drive the profit potential for teams, corporate sponsors and broadcasters alike. A declining fan base can result in low revenues and disappointing profits. Literature to date has focused predominantly on the determiners and motivational aspects of fan loyalty, at the expense of understanding the deterioration of the relationship between the sports fan and the sports team.

This research investigated the concept of sports fan detachment and the dissolution process of lapsed season ticket holders of the Blue Bulls rugby franchise. An extensive review of team identity and fan loyalty literature was undertaken together with the integration of brand detachment theories into a conceptual model. A qualitative study with 14 lapsed Blue Bulls season ticket holders resulted in the sports fan dissolution process being defined and characterised. In-depth interviews provided a means to probe and understand the respondents' experiences and insights.

The research confirmed that sports fans progress through a three stage process of dissolution including the dissolution stage (breakdown trigger, breakdown phase and decision trigger), exit stage and post dissolution stage. The breakdown triggers were characterised as interpersonal, intrapersonal or structural in nature. The breakdown phase of sports fan detachment takes place over time and is iterative in order to break the bonds with the sports object. The process is largely sequential in nature.

A model of the sports fan dissolution process was developed to illustrate and summarise the findings of the research. The aim of the model is to provide a profiling framework for sports organisations to tailor their CRM programmes to reverse the process of sports fan detachment.

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To the **Castle Lite brand team** – I really appreciate the support that I was provided during my time out of the office. Andrea, thank you so much for your patience and guidance along the way.

DECLARATION

I declare that this research project is my own work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration at the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University. I further declare that I have obtained the necessary authorisation and consent to carry out this research.

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KEYWORDS

Sports marketing, fan loyalty, sports fan detachment, dissolution process, fan retention.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

1.1 The research problem

This study explores the concept of the dissolution of fan loyalty in a sports marketing context. Literature on fan loyalty has focused predominantly on the drivers of loyalty (Dickson & Heere, 2008; Funk & James, 2006; Funk & Neale, 2006;), together with the motivational aspects of fan behaviour (Funk, Mahony & Ridinger, 2002; Kim & Trail, 2010) and the process of converting a sports fan from awareness to allegiance (Darcy, Funk, Lock & Taylor, 2012; Funk & James, 2001; Funk & James, 2004;).

However, the idea of the dissolution of the sports fan / sports team relationship has been neglected in favour of studying the development of the relationship. This is not only the case in the field of sports marketing but also in the brand management and marketing management spheres (Perrin-Martineng, 2004). This study examined the concept of sports fan detachment and the dissolution process through a qualitative exploratory research study that engaged detached South African sports fans. Therefore, the title of the study is – **Sports fan detachment: An exploration of the dissolution process.**

1.2 Motivation for investigating the research problem

1.2.1 The business of sports and the importance of fan retention

According to a 2011 PricewaterhouseCoopers study on the global sports industry, the sports market consists of the following aspects; (1) sponsorships, including payments for product association with a team, league or event and naming rights, (2) gate revenues for live sporting events, (3) media rights fees paid to flight sports on various media channels and (4) merchandising, which includes the sale of licensed products with team or league logos, player likenesses, or other intellectual property. Food concession revenues are not included (“Changing the Game”, 2011).

At the centre of the sports market is the sports fan or spectator who drives the overall profits for the industry. Sports organisations aim to secure the loyalty of a die-hard, allegiant fan not only for match day attendance but also for the sale of licensed

merchandise and the delivery of high television ratings (Funk & Neale, 2006). Loyal fans have also been known to transfer their allegiance to brands promoted by corporate sponsors during sporting events and therefore, sponsorship is a key focus in the marketing mix for brands (Burnett, Menon & Smart, 1993; Bristow & Sebastian, 2000).

According to the PricewaterhouseCoopers “Changing the Game” report (2011), sports bodies find it increasingly difficult to meet the needs of all their stakeholders simultaneously. In the past fans would vote with their feet through the gates of stadia. However, more recently fans have leveraged social media to give themselves a voice and stay up-to-date. The world of corporate sponsors and broadcasters has also changed as fans now demand a better experience than ever before. Sponsors have also found that while all the benefits of the sport are attractive, they can be quickly destroyed by the bad behaviour of star players or administrators.

The before-mentioned points demonstrate that retaining a loyal fan is not an easy task with the changing spectator needs and context in the sports market.

1.2.2 Research contribution to current literature

Wellen (2005) asserts that the main responsibility of management is to build brands and strengthen their associated brand equity by utilising marketing strategies and tactics. Branding and sports marketing have always been closely linked. Brands such as Nike are heavily involved in sports and market their products to local and international markets. Events such as the Olympic Games are an excellent example of the integration between business, sports and marketing management (Wellen, 2005). Therefore, research on sports fans and the drivers of loyalty is positioned within the context of the broader marketing and business body of knowledge.

Funk and James (2001) developed the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) that demonstrates how sport fans move through four stages of sport and team identification, namely *awareness*, *attraction*, *attachment* and ultimately *allegiance*. The study focused on the drivers that move a sports fan through each of the stages towards allegiant loyalty. However, they identified the movement of fans down the continuum as an area for further research. The authors went on to study the mediating role of attachment factors in developing an allegiant fan, although they stated that no further research had been conducted at that stage on the determinant factors or process that moves a sports fan down the PCM continuum (Funk & James, 2006).

A number of studies have focused on factors influencing defection or churn rates amongst lapsed Season Ticket Holders (STHs). McDonald (2010), in his study on the factors which influence churn rates among STHs, observed that typical marketing strategies of professional sports clubs focus on blanket schemes that aim to increase attendance and promote renewal of season tickets. Tactics need to be aligned with the tenure of the season ticket holder and the strategic drivers of fan involvement to reduce churn. The author also observed that customer satisfaction may not explain the phenomenon of season ticket holder churn. Therefore, it is important to understand the triggers and the process which STHs advance through prior to terminating their season ticket.

McDonald and Stavros (2007) conducted a defection analysis of lapsed STHs and found that the profile of lapsed STHs is one of a satisfied customer who did not renew due to a change in their circumstances. This is in contrast with the expectation that the profile of the lapsed season ticket holder would be one of a dissatisfied customer who did not renew as a form of protest. This is in contrast to Kim and Trail's (2010) findings that the constraints to sports consumption behaviour include a set of internal or intrapersonal and interpersonal constraints that explained 31% of the variance in attendance. *Attachment to the Team* and *Lack of Success* were the crucial constraints to game attendance.

The McDonald and Stavros (2007) and Kim and Trail (2010) studies focussed on the drivers of defection or churn, however, they do not consider the process which a sports fan progresses through to the point that the decision to lapse is made. In addition, research to date has focussed predominantly on the factors that drive fan loyalty (Funk & James, 2006; Funk & Neale, 2006; Dickson & Heere, 2008) and the motivational aspects of sport consumers (Funk et al., 2002; Kim & Trail, 2010) with little focus on the drivers and process of relationship dissolution with a team. It is equally important to understand fan behaviour that works in the opposite direction—the process of dissolution and detachment of sports fans. Declining fan loyalty impacts on the revenue and profits of sports associations and needs to be better understood.

This research aimed to contribute to theory on sports fan detachment and the dissolution process that fans experience. The study was based on a conceptual model developed from existing theories on brand and services detachment to evaluate whether sports fans follow similar stages of dissolution to these categories, or whether different stages exist for respondents.

1.3 Business rationale for conducting the research

1.3.1 A decline in loyalty has a direct impact on profitability

According to Perrin-Martinencq (2004), increasing competition between businesses places greater emphasis on consumer loyalty to drive a company's profitability. As a result, researchers have focussed on the concept of relationship dissolution to understand the drivers thereof. It is well understood that the cost of retaining an existing customer is far less than recruiting a new customer into the product or business franchise and therefore, businesses focus on customer retention strategies (Canti & Mai, 2010; Fajer & Schouten, 1995; McDonald, 2010; Perrin-Martinencq, 2004).

Grönroos (1990, p.5) asserted that, "If close and long-term relationships can be achieved, the possibility is high that this will lead to continuing exchanges requiring lower marketing costs per customer." Customer satisfaction and product / service quality have long been purported to be vital explanatory factors for the dissolution of brand / consumer relationships but since it has been proven that satisfied customers leave and unsatisfied customers stay with the brand, there has not yet been a sufficient explanation for the customer / brand dissolution process (Perrin-Martinencq, 2004).

In the context of sport, the support of fans is what underpins the survival and profitability of the sports industry. It is the sports supporter who pays for parking, purchases food and drinks, buys season tickets, purchases merchandise and attends games (Dhurup, 2010). Sports marketers and academics have long been concerned with the principles of building a loyal fan base to increase attendance at games (Howard, Madrigal & Mahony, 2000; Kim and Trail, 2010; McDonald, 2010). High levels of match day attendance translates into significant revenue from ticket sales and corporate suites, together with securing additional revenue streams such as sponsorship and media / broadcast rights (Funk & Neale, 2006).

1.3.2 The South African sports industry's focus on fan retention

Motlounge (2012) supported the assertion that a sports brand's financial strength is largely due to its base of loyal fans. Although not entirely recession-proof, sports brands in 2012 were seen to enjoy the support of their fans, even in times of financial uncertainty. Motlounge (2012) asserted that this trend was due to the increased sophistication of sports teams' marketing strategies. There are a number of examples of international teams, such as Manchester United, who have excelled at leveraging the allegiance of their supporters by finding innovative ways to monetise their fans' obsession with their clubs.

South African sports' teams have ensured that they have a marketing focus to catch up with this trend. For example, most of the Premier Soccer League teams have brand managers who focus on improving team loyalty and attracting significant sponsorship revenue. The sports sponsorship space has become very competitive over time, as companies understand the benefits of tapping into their consumers' sport passion points via an association with successful teams (Motloun, 2012).

Mokgata (2012) quoted Johan Grobler, CEO BMI-Sport Info, as stating that corporate sports sponsorships would decline into 2011. This affirmation was made just as several brands started pulling out of sponsorships with major cricket, rugby and soccer teams that resulted in revenue declines for the professional sports clubs. The author further asserted that Vodacom pulled back its sponsorship of the Free State Cheetahs, and the team was quoted as struggling to find a sponsor with the same financial backing. However, Vodacom retained its financial backing of the Blue Bulls, the team that has the largest rugby fan base in South Africa (Mokgata, 2012). This leads to the conclusion that sports teams need to ensure that they have a growing and loyal fan base, so should corporate sponsors review their portfolio, they are in a strong position to continue to secure financial backing from businesses.

In an editorial in the Financial Mail titled "Success has to be earned", the author stated that South African soccer fans are more interested in supporting Orlando Pirates and Kaiser Chiefs than Bafana Bafana. The lack of support for the national soccer team was seen to undermine the 2010 FIFA Soccer World Cup Soccer hosted in South Africa, and had organisers concerned about ticket sales. The editorial further explained that emotional appeals and pleas for commitment would not work to drive ticket sales and secure the profitability of the tournament, as pride and loyalty need to be earned first before fan behaviour can be changed ("Success has to be earned", 2012). In order to secure a sustainable supporter base, it is important to understand the concept of fan detachment and the dissolution process to protect the profitability of sports franchises and organisations.

1.4 Research Scope

The three largest sporting codes in South Africa are rugby, soccer and cricket (Morgan, 2013). These codes are represented by three sport franchises, The South African Rugby Union (SARU), South African Football Association (SAFA) and Cricket SA (CSA). Each of these franchises fiercely competes for South African fans even though they compete in different markets with different challenges. While rugby and cricket

face transformation issues and do not attract a representative number of black supporters, soccer is challenged by keeping white, Indian and coloured fans engaged with and involved in the sport (“CSA, SARU and SAFA meet”, 2012).

Rugby is taken very seriously by the fans of the game and can be seen as a source of either immense pride and happiness or devastating disappointment. South Africa has performed very well against its global counterparts and local fans expect the Springbok team to win every game they play, both abroad and locally (Morgan, 2013). Rugby has pioneered change in South African sports for ten years, with the structures and strategies of the South African Rugby Union (SARU) constantly altering to meet the needs and challenges in the rugby arena (“Rugby in South Africa”, 2013).

Rugby is the second most popular sport in the country with a following of over ten million fans in a population of 50 million. This translates to a significant market share and SARU’s intent is to develop the Springbok brand to encourage more sponsorship, translating to a growth in turnover. This then provides the necessary means to invest in the sport so that they can attract talented players and develop more winning teams. SARU conceded that sustained growth is vital for the future of rugby in South Africa and that the game must be watched by a significant portion of the population in order to be successful (“Rugby in South Africa”, 2013).

Rugby as a sporting code was the focus of the study and is elaborated on in the discussion on the research method.

CHAPTER 2: THEORY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Fan loyalty

Loyal consumers underpin the profitability and success of an organisation (Ferrand, Robinson & Valette-Florence, 2010). In sport, fan loyalty has been articulated as the strength of the relationship between a fan's attitude and behaviour in the form of repeat patronage (Funk & James, 2001). Prior studies have examined factors that build and predict fan loyalty (Dickson & Heere, 2008; Funk & James, 2006; Funk & Neale, 2006), together with the motivational aspects of sports consumers (Funk et al., 2002; Kim & Trail, 2010).

Interestingly, affinity for superior players and team performance is not an antecedent to attitudinal loyalty of sports fans as it is within service industries (Oliver, 1999). Loyal fans can resist the urge to change their allegiance to a team during a losing season (Bristow & Sebastian, 2000) or when their favourite player is not on form. However, this is not always the rule and sports organisations cannot afford any fluctuations in support as this would impact on the profitability of their fan base (Funk & Neale, 2006).

2.2 Classification of sports fans

In order for sports marketers to strengthen fan loyalty, a clear segmentation of the fan base is necessary to target marketing efforts at moving an individual from low commitment to high commitment or loyalty. A critical review of existing sport consumer typologies by Nicholson, Smith and Stewart (2003), revealed a number of multi-dimensional typologies based on levels of commitment and loyalty. However, at that stage, existing models did not explain how fans might move between the different segments or typologies in either direction of weakening or strengthening loyalty.

Funk et al. (2000) distinguished between four types of team loyalty based on team commitment and game attendance. The highest level of loyalty called *true loyalty* involves strong commitment and attendance. The next level called *spurious loyalty* involves weak commitment but good attendance, while *latent loyalty* was demonstrated by strong commitment but weak game attendance. The lowest level was *low loyalty* where neither of the constructs was strong. To improve the sports organisation's profitability, sports marketers would focus on increasing traffic to games by targeting latent and low loyalty fans.

Bashaw, Bristol and Hunt (1999) developed a conceptual approach to classify sports fans to assist sports marketers to explain and predict fan behaviour by fan type by ascertaining levels of commitment, together with time and space variables. The authors defined a sports fan as “an enthusiastic devotee of some particular sports consumptive object” (Bashaw et al., p. 440). They outlined various types of fans; *temporary*, *local*, *devoted*, *fanatical* and *dysfunctional* fans, together with the marketing strategies which are most appropriate for increasing commitment or loyalty with segments and “demarketing” to dysfunctional fans who are typically destructive in nature.

Funk and James (2001) developed a comprehensive and complex model of sports fan behaviour called the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM). This model adopted an incremental stage model, similar to other models in marketing and consumer behaviour literature – particularly, the AIDA model (Barry, 1987), Transtheoretical Model (TTM) (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1982) as cited in Funk and James (2001) and the Escalator Model of segmentation (Hardy, Mullin & Sutton, 2007). In contrast to the before-mentioned models, the PCM framework focused on the psychological relationship a sports fan may form with a sport object (Funk & James, 2001). The PCM model is discussed comprehensively in the following section.

2.3 The Psychological Continuum Model (PCM)

The Funk and James (2001) study which led to the development of the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) is the seminal article for this research. According to the authors, sport consumers move through four stages of sport and team identification, namely *awareness*, *attraction*, *attachment* and *allegiance*. The model proposes that “psychological connections between an individual and a sport or team are governed by the complexity and strengthening of sport-related mental associations” (Funk & James, 2001, p. 119).

The first stage is *awareness*, whereby the individual is aware of various sports and teams but has not developed a level of preference or interest in them. The next level is called *attraction*, which indicates that the sport consumer now has an acknowledged favourite team but does not strongly identify with the team. This change is largely driven by social-psychological and demographic-based motives. The next level of commitment is called *attachment*, which is characterised by a stable connection and stronger attachment with the team based on the perceived importance of the psychological and physical associations with a team or sport. The final stage is

allegiance, which is the most passionate and fanatical level of team commitment (Bashaw et al., 1999; Funk & James, 2001).

2.3.1 The behaviour of an allegiant fan

Over time researchers have demonstrated that loyalty or allegiance is composed of both behavioural and attitudinal constructs (Hennig-Thurau, Langer & Hansen, 2001; Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978; Nguyen, Leclerc, & LeBlanc, 2013) as cited in Ching-Yi, ChungChieh & ShihHao (2012). The attitudinal perspective is seen as a process of psychological attachment which results in an increased propensity to purchase or repurchase and has been proven to be a strategic predictor of fan behaviour (Kim and Park, 2000). According to Ching-Yi et al. (2012) re-patronage intention is used to measure fan loyalty and has been used to predict re-patronage behaviour, in most cases, with accuracy.

According to Funk and James (2001), an allegiant fan ultimately demonstrates loyal behaviour which is consistent over time with respect to a team in a sporting code. The behaviours typical of an allegiant fan are: (1) the behaviour itself, such as the purchase of a season ticket, team merchandise and the attendance of sporting event, and (2) a behaviour that is expressed with some time in a specific context such as watching his / her team every weekend on television (Funk & James, 2001).

These behaviours drive profit for sports franchises via ticket and merchandise income or via brand sponsorships by driving increased viewership of fans. Brands associate themselves with teams with strong fan bases, so it is critical to protect this source of income by understanding how the process of attachment builds allegiance.

2.3.2 The attachment process

Hardin and Koo (2008) asserted that many sports organisations are searching for a mechanism whereby a sports consumer repurchases a service regardless of the alternatives available, either due to an emotional attachment with the sports object or due to effective marketing communication. In a sport context, a number of studies have focused on identification or attachment with a sports team (Ching-Yi et al., 2012; Dagger & Sweeney, 2007, Darcy et al., 2012; Funk & James 2006, Funk & Neale, 2006).

Bashaw et al. (1999) used attachment to explain how different sports fan typologies could be distinguished from one another. The authors explained that a range of levels of attachment are evident, depending on how a sports fan relates the sport object to his / her concept of self. In contrast, Ching-Yi et al. (2012) study how *trust*, *vicarious*

achievement motive and *identification* influence fan loyalty towards the team or the player. The results demonstrated the importance of building team identification in the long term, as opposed to attracting star players that would provide short term results.

Funk and James (2006) concluded that despite a number of advances in understanding spectator attitudes, behaviours and fan loyalty, there is limited understanding of how an early attraction to a sports team develops over time into allegiance to a sports object or team. In the study, the authors revised the stage-based outcomes by including various processes that served to explain the progression between each level in the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM).

The results from the Funk and James (2006) study on the role of attachment in driving sport team allegiance revealed that allegiance was the outcome of an attachment process. It examined the mediating role of attachment, the process whereby a supporter moves from liking a team to becoming an allegiant fan. The results demonstrated that this was a process whereby an individual increased his / her emotional reactions to, understood more functional knowledge about, and attached greater symbolic value with the attributes and benefits associated with a sport team.

2.3.3 Movement up the vertical continuum from attachment to allegiance

Funk and James (2006) stated that movement up the vertical continuum to the last two stages of the PCM model, *attachment* and *allegiance*, is characterised by a greater emphasis on the individual process in the development of a strong person-team relationship. This process relies less on hedonic motives and social-situational factors which represent movement up the vertical continuum in the first two stages of the model, *awareness* and *attraction*.

“Attachment describes the point at which the individual has formed a meaningful psychological connection that is supported by various attitude properties” (Funk & James, 2006, p.191). The authors asserted that allegiance is built by multiple iterations of the attachment process and results in a psychological connection driven by a strong attitude which is resistant, enduring, biases cognition and influences actions.

In the Funk and James (2006) study, *vicarious achievement*, *nostalgia* and *star player* factors were seen to partially mediate the relationship between *allegiance* and *attachment* (Level 3) outcomes. This indicated that an individual's thoughts related to self-esteem benefits of team victory, a longing or nostalgia about the past and having a

favourite player in the team contributed to attachment outcomes and allegiance outcomes.

These associations were considered to be more important than the factors which fully mediated allegiance, which were *escape*, *team success* and *peer group acceptance*. The results indicated that a person may be attracted to a team because it provides an opportunity to escape from everyday life, bond with his friends and enjoy the perceived success of the team. However, allegiance does not develop in this instance until these thoughts take on emotional, functional and symbolic meaning in relation to the team. This is where marketing tactics become important to affirm allegiance (Funk & James, 2006).

Data in the Funk and James (2006) study indicated that allegiance stems from a developmental process which is based on the meaning placed on ideas, thoughts and images relating to a sports object. According to Schultz, Kleine and Kernan (1989), as cited in Funk and James (2006), allegiance was seen to be a self-developmental, non-deliberative process arising from an experience that subsequently provides integration over time. The attachment process outlines how spectators move from “I like the team” to “that is my team” and progress to “I love my team” based on a psychological connection which is a type of self-expression and extension (Funk & James, 2006).

2.3.4 Movement down the vertical continuum

The multiple manifestations of how sports fans relate to a sports object are conceptualised in the PCM model as distinct stages along a vertical psychological continuum (Funk & James, 2001). “The continuum describes motives relating to a sports object and the evaluative processes by which a person internalises features of the social situation” (Funk & James, 2001, p. 121).

Funk and James (2001) stated that it would be highly unlikely for someone to become a loyal fan overnight and display behaviours such as buying season tickets, purchasing merchandise and discussing the team with colleagues and family. Therefore each “floor” / level on the continuum is a distinct psychological connection that the person has with a sports team. The model represents a temporal process whereby an individual’s relationship or connection with a sport object is strengthened (Funk & James, 2001).

As mentioned previously, the PCM model was an important first step in explaining the various factors which could account for the movement of individuals along the vertical continuum which other sport typologies had not addressed. Funk and James (2001)

asserted that the movement along the continuum is not one directional i.e. individuals are not constrained by an upward movement only. A sports fan could lose interest in a sport and move from being a loyal, allegiant fan to merely a spectator of the sport. The example used by the authors is the change in fan behaviour from buying a season ticket to attending a few games in a year.

To further reinforce that the movement is not one directional, McDonald (2010) stated that in the context of a season ticket buyer, what typically happens is that the fan moves back and forth from a transactional buyer to season ticket status as their circumstances change and availability allows. As Funk and James (2006) demonstrated, changes in behavioural loyalty may be evident without an actual change in attitudinal loyalty. This means that true attachment or allegiance to a team is difficult to determine by only reviewing the behaviour of fans.

In contrast to the PCM, an alternative model of the fan commitment process, the *sport consumer escalator* (Hardy et al., 2007) focused on the behaviours of fans. The authors asserted that as fans increase their commitment and loyalty to a team they increase their behavioural involvement such as match day attendance and purchasing merchandise. The authors asserted that churn or switching teams should therefore be limited or unlikely due to the fact that as loyalty increases and the fan increasingly becomes more allegiant, he / she is less likely to switch to another team. The authors of the *sport consumer escalator* also concluded that as identification with the team increases the importance of maintaining the connection becomes paramount. However, the escalator model has been criticised for being simplistic (Funk & James, 2001) as it does not explain why fans might 'fall off' the escalator and decrease their level of behavioural allegiance to the sports object (McDonald, 2010).

Funk and James (2001) identified the movement of fans down the continuum as an area for further research. The authors continued to study the mediating role of attachment factors in developing an allegiant fan. However, they stated that no further research had been conducted at that stage on the determinant factors or process that move a sports fan down the PCM continuum (Funk and James, 2006). As mentioned previously, research to date has focussed predominantly on what drives fan loyalty (Dickson & Heere, 2008; Funk & James, 2006; Funk & Neale, 2006;) and the motivational aspects of sport consumers (Funk et al., 2002; Kim & Trail, 2010). However, it is equally important to understand fan behaviour which works in the opposite direction—the process of dissolution.

2.3.5 Constraints to game attendance within a spectator sports context

While limited literature exists on fan detachment or movement down the continuum, Kim and Trail (2010) developed a model to explain the relationships between constraints, motivators and game attendance within a spectator sports context. The intent of the study was to provide a basis that sports marketers could utilise to evaluate constraints and motivators to more effectively serve existing fans as well as to attract new fans. Constraints were those factors that negatively influenced attendance and were deemed to be largely contextual in nature.

The authors identified four internal constraints (*Lack of Knowledge, Lack of Success, Lack of Someone to Attend With* and *No Interest from Others*) and seven external constraints (*Commitments, Cost, Leisure Alternatives, Location, Parking, Participant Sports, Alternative Sport Entertainment*). *Attachment to the Team* (21%) and *Lack of Team Success* (10%) were seen to be the largest drivers of variance in attendance, while none of the external motivators had a significant impact on attendance. The results revealed that *Lack of Team Success* was a significant predictor of sport consumption behaviour (Kim & Trail, 2010). This contradicts Oliver (1999) and Bristow and Sebastian's (2000) assertions that fans do not change their allegiance to a team based on their performance.

McDonald (2010) also sought to explain the drivers of churn rates among STHs as nonrenewal rates were often times in excess of 20%. The results of the study showed that new, low attending STHs are over five times more likely to lapse than more long term and frequent attendees of games. He asserted that few organisations communicate differently to new STHs in comparison with long term STHs. This approach by sports organisations assumes that the act of moving from a transactional purchaser of tickets to a long term ticket holder is indicative of long term loyalty.

McDonald (2010) explained that studies on churn demonstrate that it can be as a result of dissatisfaction with the quality of the product or service, the length of the relationship with new customers churning more than older customers and involuntary churn due to uncontrollable factors. In a defection analysis of lapsed STHs, McDonald and Stavros (2007) showed that lapsed members were not necessarily dissatisfied but their profile was rather one of a satisfied individual who could not renew due their circumstances having changed. Approximately 70% of respondents cited lifestyle factors as a reason for not renewing their membership - these factors are uncontrollable in nature. This was in direct contrast to Kim and Trail's (2010) findings.

2.4 Brand Detachment Theory

2.4.1 Brand detachment

Attachment is defined as “the strength of the cognitive and emotional bond connecting the brand with the self” (MacInnis, Park & Priester, 2007, p. 3). This definition has two important elements: (1) the connection between the brand and the individual and (2) a bond which is both cognitive and emotional. According to MacInnis et al. (2007), attachments only develop when a brand has a strong connection with the individual – the strongest form is when the brand is seen as an extension of oneself. The authors further asserted that “due to hot effect”, brand attachment creates a strong desire to commit financial resources to maintain the relationship.

In direct contrast to attachment, Canti and Mai (2008) defined detachment as a result of the need of the individual to maintain an emotional distance between him / herself and others. Relationships between people and brands endure a close resemblance to interpersonal relationships (Fournier, 1998), where detachment can be seen as a state prior to the termination of the brand-person relationship or affiliation. Brand detachment is defined by Perrin-Martineq (2004, p. 1007) as “the psychological state of distance with regard to a brand, resulting from the weakening or the dissolution of the affective bond existing between a consumer and the brand”.

2.4.2 Relationship dissolution process

Duck (1982) as cited in Hocutt (1998) stated that the dissolution of a relationship can result in the permanent ending of an existing relationship. Relationship dissolution is a lengthy process with cognitive, affective and emotional aspects and cannot be seen as an event, although Coulter and Ligas (2000) argued that there are certain factors or events which can trigger the dissolution process. Duck (1982) cited in Hocutt (1998) presented a four stage process of relationship dissolution which begins when one party evaluates his / her dissatisfactions with the other individual privately and is concluded when costs outweigh the benefits of the relationship. The two parties then negotiate their parting and finally there is a stage of social and psychological recovery from the break up process.

According to Hocutt (1998) the authors Dwyer, Oh and Schurr (1987) were the first marketers to present a process of dissolution of the buyer-seller relationship. According to their model a strong and stable relationship is built after four stages (*awareness, exploration, expansion and commitment*) which can be likened to stages in Funk and James' (2001) PCM framework. However, the fifth stage in their model was the phase

of relationship dissolution and argued that the dissolution process was particularly important once individuals had entered the commitment phase of the continuum. The benefits that accrued to buyers and sellers at this stage are what make dissolution of the relationship particularly difficult (Dwyer et al., 1987).

2.4.3 The dissolution process of brand detachment

Perrin-Martineng (2004) asserted that the dissolution of a brand / consumer relationship has been relatively neglected in marketing literature. The author developed a conceptual model of brand detachment based on a prior qualitative study and tested the hypothesis that “brand detachment results from the dissolution of the affective bond existing between a brand and a consumer and can be seen as an attitudinal aspect of the dissolution process of certain relationships” (Perrin-Martineng, 2004, p. 1001).

Prior to discussing and comparing existing research on relationship dissolution, it is important to first discuss the view of process to which this study applies. Van de Ven (1992) as cited in Tähtinen (2002) defined a process as a sequence of activities that demonstrates how things change over a space of time. This does not necessarily mean that the process needs to follow a one directional flow as per Funk and James’ (2001) observation of a movement down the vertical continuum of the PCM and McDonald’s (2010) observation of how STHs move backwards and forwards before they switch. In the Tähtinen (2002) study the process was viewed as a multiple progression of various different streams of activities which evolved as the relationship developed over time.

This study aimed to understand the nature of the dissolution process in the context of a detached sports fan by reviewing prior literature on various dissolution process models in order to create a conceptual model for testing. These models are listed below in **Table 1.**

Table 1 Relationship dissolution process models

Title and Author	Model Type	Process of Dissolution
Breakdown and dissolution of person-brand relationships Fajer and Schouten (1995)	Brand-Person	1. Breakdown 2. Decline 3. Disengagement 4. Dissolution
The long good-bye: The dissolution of customer-service provider relationships Coulter and Ligas (2000)	Customer-Service Provider	1. Dissolution stage a) Breakdown trigger b) Breakdown phase c) Determinant incident 2. Exit stage 3. Post dissolution stage
Process theory of relationship ending Halinen and Tähtinen (2002)	Professional services	1. Assessment stage 2. Decision-making stage 3. Dyadic communication stage 4. Disengagement stage 5. Aftermath stage
The process of business relationship ending – Its stages and actors Tähtinen (2002)	Business relationships	1. Consideration stage 2. Restoration stage 3. Disengagement stage 4. Sense-making and aftermath stage 5. Enabling stage 6. Communication stage

Fajer and Schouten (1995) outlined the dissolution process of the relationship between a brand and a consumer based on Duck's (1982) research on interpersonal relationship dissolution. Four phases in the dissolution process were identified:

- a) **Breakdown:** In the person-brand scenario, this may result from unmet expectations of brand performance, the appearance of potentially superior alternatives to the brand and changing consumer liking criteria or needs.
- b) **Decline:** In the person-brand context, this refers to an affective reduction of liking or loyalty which ultimately leads to a deterioration of the relationship.
- c) **Disengagement:** This phase encompasses behaviour such as an active search for alternatives and / or the establishment of alternative brand relationships i.e. trial of a new brand.
- d) **Dissolution:** This stage refers to the termination of the relationship, either through negotiation or simple withdrawal.

In summary, the *breakdown* stage refers to a scenario that triggers the process. *Decline* is an affective stage which can be seen as the opposite of the attachment phase which is also affective. This is then followed by *disengagement* which is

behavioural in nature and ultimately *dissolution* ends the process with the termination of the relationship.

2.4.4 The dissolution process of service detachment

According to McDonald (2010), marketing in the sports industry may be likened to high-involvement services marketing. In the current operating environment, professional sports organisations are required to offer high-quality events and services. As in all service sectors, the delivery of high-quality services promotes customer loyalty in the long term and enhances the profitability of the professional sports organisation (Dagger & Sweeney, 2007).

Coulter and Ligas (2000) argued that the dissolution process for customer-service providers follows three distinct stages, namely (a) the dissolution stage, (b) the exit stage and (c) the post-dissolution stage. Each of these stages are discussed below:

- a) **The dissolution stage:** Literature on the dissolution of personal relationships suggests that the breakdown takes place over a period of time (Fajer and Schouten, 1995; Tähtinen, 2002). The Coulter and Ligas (2000) study defined three stages of the long exit: the *breakdown trigger*, the *breakdown phase* and the *determinant incident*.
 - Particular factors can *trigger breakdown* and the dissolution process. In the Coulter and Ligas (2000) study, the trigger was service-related.
 - The *breakdown phase* is defined by Coulter and Ligas (2000) as a period of time which passes post the breakdown trigger in which the customer-service relationship continues. In this phase the customer progresses through a number of both positive and negative experiences, as well as periods of apathy and an internal assessment of the psychological and transactional switching costs of the dissolution.
 - The end of the breakdown phase is marked by a *determinant incident* which causes the customer to end the relationship. The determinant incident can be either service, market, self or other related (Coulter and Ligas, 2000).
- b) **The exit stage:** In both Dwyer et. al (1987) and Duck's (1982)—as cited in Fajer and Schouten (1995)—dissolution models, they described a phase where both sides of the relationship agreed to end the relationship. In the

Coulter and Ligas (2000) study the informants exited in one of three ways; without notification, active confrontation with the service provider and by passively writing a letter to announce his / her departure.

- c) **The post-dissolution stage:** Once the customers had left their service providers, many had expressed that they may seek the service of their old provider again, while others has strong reactions to the termination and the departures seemed permanent. The subjects of the study either had a weak dissolution process or a relatively strong one, which determined whether the relationship may be consummated again (Coulter and Ligas, 2000).

The two processes purported by Fajer and Schouten (1995) and Coulter and Ligas (2000) are relatively similar with the exception of the identification of the specific trigger event, determinant incident and the length of the process of dissolution.

2.4.5 The dissolution process of buyer-seller relationships

In contrast to the previous two processes, Halinen and Tähtinen (2002) proposed a process model for the termination of business or buyer-seller relationships. The study reviewed the process in the context of professional services. The authors proposed the following five stages in the model:

- a) **Assessment:** In this stage both parties involved in the relationship start to assess its current status, what its future holds and the potential for the relationship to end.
- b) **Decision-making:** This stage is when decisions start to be made about the future of the relationship. In this case, restoration of the relationship is possible and if not, the relationship progresses to the next stage.
- c) **Dyadic communication:** In this instance the decision to exit or restore the relationship is vocalised by the partner either directly or indirectly.
- d) **Disengagement:** If both parties decide not to follow restorative actions to save the relationship, then disengagement is likely to happen in tandem with dyadic communication. Resource ties start to weaken and the business partnership begins to decline. Various precipitating events may trigger the disengagement process and are seen to be highly influential at this stage.
- e) **Aftermath stage:** Here the ending of the relationship is internalised and made final. While the business relationship has been severed, it is at this

stage when the parties mentally retrace the ending process to make sense of what has happened.

The before-mentioned ending process proposed by Halinen and Tähtinen (2002), has multiple stages of potential restorative activity which is in direct contrast to the first two models proposed by Fajer and Schouten (1995) and Coulter and Ligas (2000). Coulter and Ligas (2002) argued that restorative processes only commence after the relationship has been ended in the post-dissolution phase, once the person has had time to reflect. Duck (1982) as cited by Fajer and Schouten (1995) did not mention a restorative phase or a time in which the actor reflects on re-consummating the relationship.

Tähtinen (2002) went further to develop the before-mentioned process model by (1) reducing the number of stages by suggesting one communication stage instead of networking and dyadic communication, (2) the case applied in the study served to clarify the stages and the contents thereof and (3) an enabling stage emerged from the data analysis. In summary, the six stages are articulated as follows:

- a) **Consideration stage:** This encompasses both parties total decision-making process in the context of the decision to maintain or end the relationship.
- b) **Communication stage:** Refers to all communications which pertain to the maintenance or ending of the relationship. Each party may either decide to follow an exit strategy which terminates the relationship, or a voice strategy which can restore the relationship.
- c) **Disengagement stage:** This is when the business exchange relationship declines and resource links are severed.
- d) **Enabling stage:** This stage may follow the former and involves those activities which aim to facilitate the ending of the relationship by either lowering barriers to exit or attenuating factors.
- e) **The aftermath and sense-making stage:** This refers to the actions which take place to internalise the ending of the relationship and make sense of it. It is reflective in nature.

While the business relationship processes certainly provide a different perspective on the restorative processes which could potentially take place in the context of a sports fan dissolution process, it is likely that the detached fan does not communicate with the sports organisation prior to leaving, as alluded to in the studies on the churn of STHs (McDonald, 2010; Kim & Trail, 2010).

The analysis of the various dissolution processes across brand and service markets leads to the definition of the first research proposition for this study. Of the relationship dissolution models reviewed, both the Duck (1982) as cited in Fajer and Schouten (1995) and the Coulter and Ligas (2000) processes of dissolution are similar in nature. While the professional services and business related processes (Halinen & Tähtinen, 2002; Tähtinen, 2002) are less relevant as the business relationship enables one-on-one communication. In a sporting context, the relationship is not interpersonal and therefore, these models are less relevant in this context. The Coulter and Ligas (2000) customer-services process of relationship dissolution was deemed to more appropriate in relation to sports marketing. The following proposition is based on this model.

Proposition 1

The sports fan dissolution process follows a three part process of dissolution (breakdown trigger, breakdown phase, determinant incident), exit and post-dissolution phases as per the consumer / service provider detachment process.

2.4.6 Relationship dissolution process triggers

Coulter and Ligas (2000), Fajer and Schouten (1995) and Perrin-Martineng (2004) all argued that the dissolution process is triggered by either an event or by an affective state of the consumer. In order to completely understand the process of dissolution, it is important to understand the triggers thereof. A review of the literature follows.

Table 2 Summary of literature on relationship dissolution triggers

Title and author	Model type	Process of dissolution triggers
Dissolution of a Person-Brand Relationship: An Understanding of Brand Detachment Canti and Mai (2008)	Brand-Person	Found no evidence of a dissolution trigger
Breakdown and Dissolution of Person-Brand Relationships Fajer and Schouten (1995)	Brand-Person	Consumer initiated break-ups 1. Brand switching 2. Brand spurning 3. Brand alienation
The Long Good-Bye: The Dissolution of Customer-Service Provider Relationships Coulter and Ligas (2000)	Customer-Service provider	Service related encounter 1. Core service failure 2. Service encounter failure 3. Response to service failure 4. Ethical problems
The Role of Brand Detachment on the Dissolution of the Relationship Between the Consumer and the Brand Perrin-Martinengq (2004)	Brand-Person	Process of detachment (Author 2002) 1. Factors inherent to the brand a) Deterioration in quality b) Changes or lack of change in brand style c) Brand ethics 2. Changes in the individual a) Needs b) Values c) Preferences 3. Factors inherent to the situation a) Fashion b) Existence of alternatives

Fajer and Schouten (1995) asserted that the termination of a person-brand relationship can be initiated or triggered by the consumer. These triggers include *brand switching* to indicate a temporary shift from regular purchase of the brand. This can be indicative of mild dissatisfaction, consumer boredom or the need for variety. In contrast, *brand spurning* is more permanent in nature and refers to a permanent termination of the relationship due to a loss in customer satisfaction due to poor product performance or incompatibility in the relationship due to a lack of inherent features.

In higher order relationships or attached relationships, it is only compound product failures or a radical change in consumer liking criteria that lead to brand alienation. This is defined as “a state of extreme, generalised dissatisfaction” (Fajer & Schouten, 1995, p. 665). The authors alluded to an iterative process instead of a once-off trigger in the permanent termination of brand-person relationships.

In contrast, Coulter and Ligas (2000) asserted that there are a number of events or triggers that are all service-related such as a core service failure, ethical issues, the service provider's response to the service failure or a service-encounter failure. These failures could be likened to the factors that influence match day attendance (Kim & Trail, 2010; McDonald, 2010). These factors include poor on-field performance, alternative forms of entertainment, and low member satisfaction and low levels of involvement with the team.

Perrin-Martinenq (2004) discussed three different triggers of the dissolution process. These ranged from factors inherent to the brand such as the deterioration in quality or change (or lack thereof) to the style of the brand. This is in alignment with Fajer and Schouten's (1995) observations and can be compared to *Lack of Team Success* or changes in *Team Attachment* which were constraints to match day attendance in the Kim and Trail's (2010) study and dissatisfaction with the team (McDonald, 2010).

In line with Fajer and Schouten's (1995) assertions on the triggers of brand alienation, Perrin-Martinenq (2004) stated that changes to the individual that included changes in their needs, values and preferences can trigger the dissolution process. Lastly, Perrin-Martinenq (2004) mentioned factors that are inherent to the situation can trigger the dissolution process. These include the existence of alternatives or changing fashion, which may be likened to the uncontrollable or external factors that are outside a sport's organisation's control (Kim and Trail 2010; McDonald, 2010). In contrast with the before-mentioned literature, Canti and Mai (2008) found no evidence of a trigger to the dissolution process of brand detachment.

The common themes throughout the literature lead to the conclusion that there are potentially three crucial triggers to the dissolution process. The first trigger is related to a lack of team success which can be associated with the deterioration in product quality. The appearance of attractive alternatives when satisfaction is low can trigger the process of dissolution and a change in the needs, values or preferences of the individual over time. An analysis of the dissolution triggers in literature and the translation of the triggers into a sporting context lead to the research proposition:

Proposition 2

Unmet expectations of team performance, the appearance of attractive sport or team alternatives and changes in team liking criteria trigger the dissolution process for an allegiant or attached sports fan to become detached from his team.

2.4.6 The nature of progress through the dissolution process

Coulter and Ligas (2000) asserted that the breakdown phase of the dissolution stage is iterative in nature. In the services context, it appears that the process takes longer than in a person-brand scenario as people have a stronger connection to other people relative to brands. The bond takes longer to break and the process of detachment is longer. McDonald (2010) further confirmed this by stating that STHs often move back and forth from a transactional buyer to season ticket status as their circumstances change and availability allows.

As per Funk and James (2001), Funk and James (2006) and Halinen and Tähtinen (2002), stated the movement along the vertical continuum is iterative particularly at the attachment stage. As the bonds strengthen post a reinforcing experience, the sports fan becomes more allegiant to the team. Bowden (2009) further confirmed this assertion by recognising that customer-brand relationships grow and evolve over time due to increased experience.

A review of literature on customer engagement in services revealed that the process of engagement is also highly iterative. Bowden (2009) presented a conceptual framework for the process of engagement that demonstrates how new customers are engaged versus repeat customers. In both cases a feedback loop informs the customer's knowledge set. As the new customer experiences delight, this increases their affective commitment that increases their loyalty and likelihood to repeat the purchase process. It is an iterative process of feedback loops which take place over time.

Hollebeek (2011) also presented a conceptual model of customer brand engagement which has a feedback loop between relationship quality and customer brand engagement on a cognitive, emotional and behavioural level. Brodie, Hollebeek, Ilić and Jurić (2011) proposed that customer engagement occurs in the context of an iterative, dynamic process of a service relationship that co-creates value. This assertion is based on the fact that customer engagement is a temporal process which is either short or long term and is highly complex or relatively stable. The authors stated that research within social science and management disciplines recognise that the engagement process is characterised by iterative and cyclical dynamics.

The authors further concurred with this assessment by stating that relational consequences may be engagement antecedents in subsequent customer engagement processes or cycles over time which recognises the iterative nature of the process. This concept can be thought of as feedback loops over time. This iterative nature of the

engagement concept suggests that through temporally dispersed interactions and repeated engagements with a key object; customer engagement may emerge across interactions over time (Brodi et al., 2011).

The literature on the detachment process (Coulter and Ligas, 2000; Halinen and Tähtinen, 2002), the constraints to match day attendance (McDonald, 2010), attachment (Funk and James, 2001, Funk and James 2006) and customer engagement (Bowden 2009; Brodi et al., 2011) demonstrated that the process to either strengthen engagement or attachment and the process to weaken bonds with a sports object or detachment are cyclical / iterative in nature.

An analysis of the before-mentioned processes in literature leads to the research proposition:

Proposition 3

The breakdown phase of sports fan detachment is iterative or cyclical in nature to break the bonds with the sports object.

Studies have revealed that customer engagement processes are largely sequential in nature (Bowden, 2009; Brodi et al., 2011 and Hollebeek, 2011). While the customer engagement processes reviewed previously all make mention of a cyclical feedback loop, the sequence of events is deemed to be linear. Funk and James (2001) also presented the PCM as a linear process in which the individual moves from awareness to allegiance. While the sports fan may not progress all the way along the continuum to allegiance, the process follows a sequence of stages. Like the customer engagement processes mentioned, Funk and James (2006) affirmed that while the PCM is sequential, the attachment process is iterative in nature to strengthen the bonds with the sports object to the point of the fan becoming allegiant to the team.

In contrast, Halinen and Tähtinen (2002) and Tähtinen (2004) claimed that certain stages of concluding the process of business relationship may be avoided and the order of the stages can vary. These authors continued that various stages can happen simultaneously because different actors are involved in performing the actions. They used the example of individuals in a buyer business considering whether to end the relationship or not, while the seller company performs actions to restore it.

However, when comparing the remaining detachment and dissolution processes for services and brands, the progression between stages is sequential in nature (Coulter & Ligas, 2000; Fajer & Schouten, 1995 and Perrin-Martineq, 2004). Like the engagement processes, Coulter and Ligas (2000) also make mention of an iterative

breakdown phase within the context of a sequential process. Given the before-mentioned review, the following proposition serves to evaluate these assertions:

Proposition 4

The sports fan dissolution process of detachment is sequential in nature.

2.5 A conceptual model of the sports fan dissolution process

The following outlines a conceptual model of the sports fan dissolution process based on prior literature. Since sports marketing is likened to services marketing as opposed to FMCG or product marketing practices (McDonald, 2010), it is expected that the dissolution process of sports fan detachment and the dissolution process would mirror one of customer-service provider relationship.

Both the Duck (1982) as cited in Fajer and Schouten (1995) and the Coulter and Ligas (2000) processes are similar in nature. While the professional services and business related processes (Halinen & Tähtinen, 2002; Tähtinen, 2002) follow a similar step-wise flow, they are less relevant as the business relationship enables one-on-one communication. This is dissimilar to sports fan vs. sports organisation relationships that are indirect in nature. While these studies demonstrated that the process is not necessarily linear in nature, literature on the customer engagement process (Bowden, 2009; Brodi et al., 2011 and Hollebeek, 2011) and PCM for sports fans (Funk & James, 2001; Funk & James, 2006) claimed that the process of engagement and the strengthening relationship of sports fans is sequential in nature.

As asserted by Funk and James (2006), sports fans' allegiances are strengthened by multiple iterations of the attachment process and results in a psychological connection driven by a strong attitude which is resistant, enduring, biases cognition and influences actions. In a similar vein, affective detachment which commences at the early stages of the dissolution process can also be seen to be iterative. Duck (1982) as cited by Fajer and Schouten (1995) stated that the decline phase is one in which the affective bonds in the relationship start to breakdown leading to an eventual dissolution of the relationship. Coulter and Ligas (2000) confirmed this assertion by stating that the breakdown phase happens over time and is as a result of a number of positive and negative experiences.

The literature on the triggers of the dissolution process also confirms that in a sporting context; unmet expectations of team performance, the appearance of attractive sport or

team alternatives and changes in team liking criteria could be triggers of the dissolution process for an allegiant or attached sports fan to become detached from his team. Therefore, the following conceptual framework in **Figure 1** has been defined for the dissolution process of sports fan detachment:

Figure 1 Conceptual model of the sports fan dissolution process of detachment

PHASES	SUB-PHASE	CHARACTERISTICS	SEQUENCE
Dissolution Stage	Breakdown Trigger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unmet expectations of team performance • The appearance of attractive sport or team alternatives • Changes in team liking criteria 	↓
	Breakdown Phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Iterative phase with positive and negative experiences 	↻
	Decision Trigger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Related to the before-mentioned triggers 	↓
Exit Stage		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active termination of the relationship i.e. cancellation of season tickets 	↓
Post Dissolution Stage		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Re-patronage intention – likely vs. unlikely 	↓

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH PROPOSITIONS

3.1 Research area

Within the literature review in Chapter 2 a dearth in information was identified concerning the research of the downward movement on the vertical continuum of the PCM (Funk & James, 2001). In order to understand what would constitute a movement in the opposite direction, brand detachment theory has been consulted in order to further understand the dissolution process within categories outside of sports, such as brand and services management. The literature review in Chapter 2 identified a number of relationship dissolution process models which have been discussed and critically analysed with a view to construct a conceptual model on which to base the research propositions for this study.

3.2 Development of the research propositions

In order to address the identified gap in existing literature, the four research propositions presented are based on a review of existing literature and are central to the primary research study.

Of the relationship dissolution models studied, both the Duck (1982) as cited in Fajer and Schouten (1995) and the Coulter and Ligas (2000) processes of dissolution are similar in nature. The professional services and business related processes (Halinen & Tähtinen, 2002; Tähtinen, 2002) are less relevant as the business relationship enables one-on-one communication. In a sporting context, the relationship is not interpersonal and therefore, these models are less relevant in this context. The Coulter and Ligas (2000) customer-services process of relationship dissolution was deemed to be more appropriate in relation to sports marketing. The following proposition is based on this model.

Proposition 1

- The sports fan dissolution process follows a three part process of dissolution (breakdown trigger, breakdown phase, determinant incident), exit and post-dissolution phases as per the consumer / service provider detachment process.

In line with Fajer and Schouten's (1995) assertions on the triggers of brand dissolution, Perrin-Martinenq (2004) also stated that the triggers are linked to dissatisfaction,

switching to attractive alternatives and due to changes in the individual. Therefore, the following proposition is presented in the context of research on sports fan detachment:

Proposition 2

- Unmet expectations of team performance, the appearance of attractive sport or team alternatives and changes in team liking criteria trigger the dissolution process for an allegiant or attached sports fan to become detached from his team.

Affective detachment commences at the early stages of the dissolution process can be viewed as cyclical and iterative. Duck (1982) as cited by Fajer and Schouten (1995) stated that affective bonds in the relationship start to breakdown in the decline phase, leading to an eventual dissolution of the relationship. Coulter and Ligas (2000) confirmed this assertion by noting that the breakdown phase occurs over time and is a result of a number of positive and negative experiences. The following proposition aims to evaluate whether the sports fan dissolution process is iterative nature:

Proposition 3

- The breakdown phase of sports fan detachment is iterative in nature to break the bonds with the sports object

In alignment with research on the customer engagement process (Bowden, 2009; Brodi et al., 2011 and Hollebeek, 2011) and the sequential movements up the PCM continuum (Funk & James, 2001; Funk & James, 2006), studies have shown that the dissolution process is largely sequential in nature (Coulter & Ligas, 2000; Fajer and Schouten, 1995; Perrin-Martinengq, 2004). The following proposition serves to evaluate these assertions:

Proposition 4

- The sports fan dissolution process of detachment is sequential in nature.

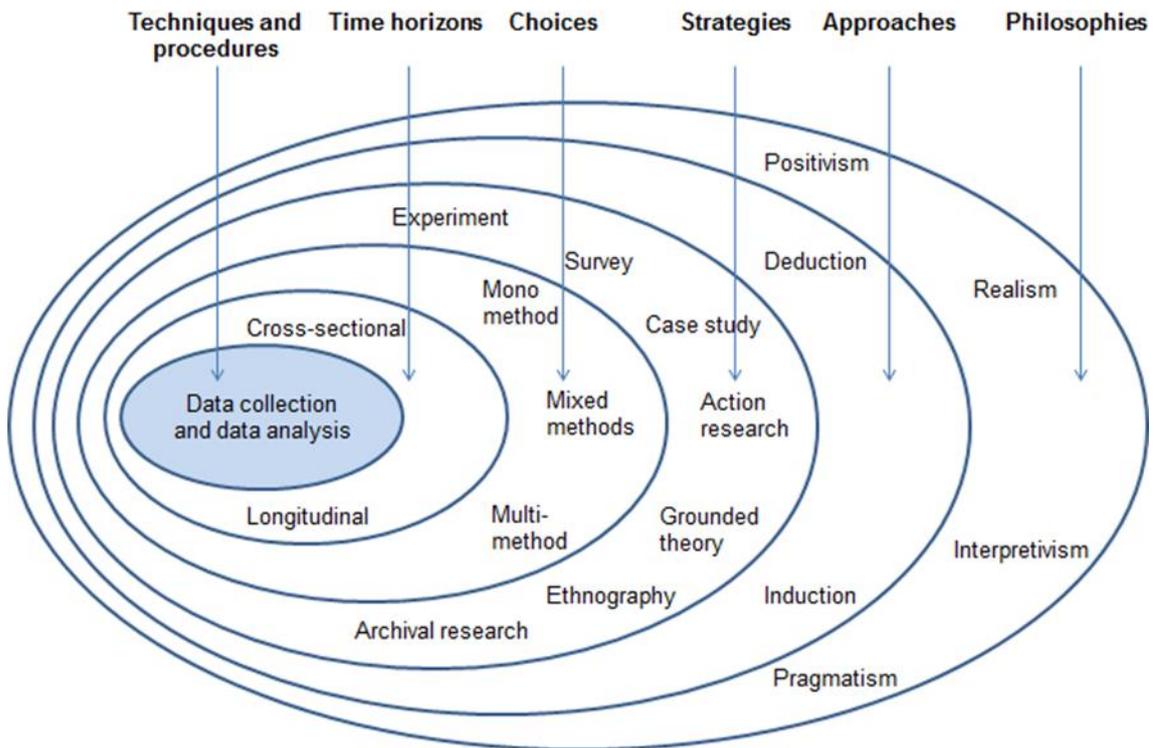
CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

4.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the research methodology and design used to test the propositions defined in Chapter 3. These propositions were derived from the conceptual model of the sports fan dissolution process of detachment, derived through a process of deduction from the literature review on detachment processes in Chapter 2. Research limitations have also been defined and presented for discussion at the end of this chapter.

Saunders and Lewis (2012, p. 103) presented a research onion which forms the foundation from which a researcher must make decisions about the appropriate research design for the study under consideration. The onion presented in **Figure 2** below is a metaphor for the multiple layers of the research process. These choices provide a framework for the discussion of the research methodology and design for this study which in turn explores the dissolution process of sports fan detachment.

Figure 2 The research onion (Saunders & Lewis, 2012, p. 103)



4.2 Research philosophy

According to Saunders and Lewis (2012) the research philosophy that is selected contains important assumptions that underpin the research strategy selected and the data collection methods which have been chosen for this particular study. The main strands of research philosophy either relate to scientific inquiry, such as positivism and realism or interpretivism. These concepts relate to social phenomena in their natural context or environment. In this particular research study, a philosophy of interpretivism is most appropriate as it pertains to understanding the dissolution process that lapsed STHs or the “social actors” undergo when they become detached from their sports team.

The authors of the reviewed literature asserted that in order to interpret the behaviours of the “social actors”, or respondents in this case, these may be interpreted according to what the researcher defines as appropriate and in accordance with the individual’s definition of the behaviour. This then suggests that the researcher’s values play a crucial role in the interpretation of the behaviours and this must be kept in mind by the researcher. It is important to understand the dissolution process that has been experienced by the respondents from their perspective (Saunders & Lewis, 2012). This could be deemed as a potential limitation of the research but has been controlled for by following a highly structured research design and analysis process.

4.3 Research approach

The research design can be either qualitative, quantitative or a mixture of both. Since the research question deals with understanding the dissolution process of sports fan detachment, it alludes to an interpretivism research philosophy and a study which is qualitative in nature. Marshall and Rossman (2006, p.2) defined qualitative research as “a broad approach to the study of social phenomena”.

In contrast, quantitative data refers to data which is numerical and has been collected in a standardised fashion. This research approach is not suitable for this study’s research question as it does not deliver understanding of social phenomena or rather, the underlying behaviour of the respondents.

According to Marshall and Rossman (2006), it is necessary to provide a rationale for the selected genre in which the qualitative study is situated. **Table 4** below outlines the genres and overall strategies as defined by the authors:

Table 3 Qualitative genre and overall strategy (Marshall & Rossman, 2006)

Genre	Main strategy	Focus of inquiry
Individual lived experience	In-depth interviews	Individuals
Society and culture	Case study	Groups or organisations
Language and communication	Microanalysis or text analysis	Speech events and interactions

In order to explore the dissolution process of sports fan detachment it was deemed necessary to gain a deep understanding of the respondent's individual lived experience of the process. Therefore, the genre of qualitative research appropriate for this study was *individual lived experience* with the main strategy being in-depth interviews with individual lapsed STHs.

Saunders and Lewis (2012) mentioned two further research approaches: deduction and induction. These authors defined deduction as an approach whereby a theoretical proposition is tested using a strategy designed for this purpose. In contrast, induction refers to developing a theory from the explanations that arise as a result of analysing data that has already been collected. In Chapter 2 of this study, a conceptual model has been arrived at by using a deductive process of literature review. The theory and conceptual model form the basis of the research propositions defined in Chapter 2, which have been tested in a deductive qualitative study to confirm the conceptual model or modifying it in light of the findings.

4.4 Research strategies

According to Saunders and Lewis (2012), the next layer of the research onion is the choice of research strategy. The research strategies which follow present the manner in which the research problem has been answered.

4.4.1 Exploratory research

As the concept of sport fan detachment has not been studied comprehensively, it was important to source detailed information from allegiant and attached fans to further understand the dissolution process that they followed when they became detached from their team. An exploratory study is defined as "research that aims to seek new insights, ask new questions and to assess topics in a new light" (Saunders & Lewis, 2012, p.110). While this study can be defined as largely exploratory, it also has descriptive and explanatory elements. Respondents were expected to accurately describe the events that took place in the process of dissolution and were also required

to explain the triggers of the process together with the relationship between the variables.

It is a largely loose research structure that aimed to understand consumer behaviour at a more profound level than a quantitative, descriptive study would. Saunders and Lewis (2012) further defined the usual process of conducting exploratory research as follows: (1) searching academic literature, (2) interviewing 'experts' in the subject and (3) conducting the interviews. Chapter 2 summarised the academic theory and conceptual model upon which the Chapter 3 propositions were derived. These propositions were tested by interviewing detached fans on the process of dissolution.

4.4.2 The use of in depth interviews

According to Marshall and Rossman (2006), qualitative in-depth interviews follow a more conversational structure than when formal events are utilised that pre-categorise respondents according to responses. The researcher explored general topics, thereby allowing the respondent to frame the response according to the individual's experiences. As mentioned previously, this method was important to overcome the limitations which could have been imposed by an interpretivism philosophy. The interview was based on the respondents' perspectives on the phenomenon of interest and was explained as the respondents' perceived it, rather than the researcher's view. An important part of the interviewer's approach was to ensure that the respondent felt as if the views presented were seen as both useful and valuable.

Marshall and Rossman (2006) further explained that interviews have particular strengths, such as yielding a quantity of data quickly. Immediate clarification and probing of answers are also a possibility in an interview setting. Interviewing also has a number of limitations. As interviews are a personal interaction, it is very important that co-operation and trust are maintained throughout the process. Respondents may feel uncomfortable sharing information and may have certain underlying reasons for concealing the truth. It is important that a rapport is built and that the researcher has excellent listening and interpretation skills to enhance the research outcome (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

In order to build rapport with the respondents, the warm up and background process as propounded by Du Preez (2012) was followed. This included taking time to build rapport with the respondents in the beginning by explaining the nature of the study in everyday language and in the respondents' context. It was important to communicate that there were no right or wrong answers to the questions and that the researcher was simply seeking to understand the respondents' experiences. The researcher listened

carefully and attentively while repeating the respondents' answers to ensure that the concepts were understood correctly. In the face-to-face interviews the researcher's body language indicated that attentive listening was taking place by leaning in to the respondent slightly.

As demonstrated by the conceptual model defined in Chapter 2, the purpose of the study was to ascertain the respondents' perspectives on the events that characterised the process of dissolution. It was their subjective views that were captured in the in-depth interview which formed the basis of this research.

4.5 Method choice

A mono-method approach was followed in this study since the aim of the research was to gain a deep understanding of the process of dissolution. Studies which follow on from this research may employ a quantitative approach to validate the findings of this research. However, this is not within the scope of this particular study.

4.6 Qualitative research

In order to test the distinct research propositions defined in Chapter 3, the research method selected is a qualitative study that involved a combination of face-to-face and telephonic in-depth interviews conducted with detached sports fans. This method aimed to explore the process of dissolution in the context of the propositions. The sample size was determined based on the concept of saturation, which is discussed later in this chapter.

4.7 Time horizon

According to Saunders and Lewis (2012), a cross-sectional study implies that data is collected at a specific point in time while a longitudinal study collects data on a particular topic over a period of time. Qualitative studies are typically a product of data collection over a period of time (Dey, 1993). However, this research study asked participants to reflect on their experiences via a retrospective interview method.

This approach was aligned with the method utilised by Darcy et al. (2012), which employed a reflective technique to understand how the development of team identification had manifested itself with new fans of Sydney Football Club. The

interview process followed in this study similarly focused on the thoughts and opinions of respondents, while also exploring the process, behaviours and determinants that resulted in the detachment of the fan.

4.8 Population and sampling

4.8.1 The population of interest

Saunders and Lewis (2012, p.132) defined a population as “the complete set of group members”. In this case, the researcher was required to use logic and judgement in determining the population for the current research. In the case of this study, the population of interest was defined as all South African sports fans who have become detached from their sports team.

4.8.2 Sampling procedure

In order to fully define the sampling procedure, the sample frame, size and method must be presented:

4.8.2.1 Sample frame

The sampling frame was described by Saunders & Lewis (2012) as a complete list of all members of the population of interest. In this case, it was not possible to generate a full list of detached sports fans as it would not be feasible from both time and budgetary perspectives. Since there was no complete list of detached sports fans in South Africa to leverage, a sample frame was employed of Blue Bulls STHs who had lapsed in the last year.

This was based on the assumption purported by Funk and James (2001), that detachment could be indicated by an individual not renewing a season ticket subscription and only attending one or two games in the future. Funk and James (2006) also asserted that a fan who moves from a single ticket buyer to a season ticket holder makes a significant increase in commitment, behaviourally and most likely attitudinally too. This then assumes a relatively strong level of attachment to the team and not renewing a season ticket would then allude to a process of detachment.

4.8.2.2 Rationale for sample frame selection

A 2012 BMI report on the performance of the Vodacom Rugby Teams revealed that the Blue Bulls had the largest fan base of all provincial rugby teams in South Africa with 2 439 000 fans in 2012. The team suffered double digital declines in its fan base into

2012, with the Blue Bulls declining at 10.9% Year On Year. Only two of the 12 teams had grown in 2012. However, the report stated that this was expected as many supporters typically joined a sport in a World Cup year but then disappeared again thereafter. On closer inspection of the Blue Bulls fan base over the years from 2009 to 2012, the total number of supporters was relatively stable with little growth in 2011 (“2012 Vodacom Rugby Teams”, 2012).

This trended view was in contradiction to the 2012 BMI report and if one evaluates the team’s current marketing tactics it is evident that the team is under pressure to retain its fan base. In February 2013, the Blue Bulls marketing team released a video of the players singing a version of *Stand By Me* with a call-to-action for supporters to learn the words and sing it in the stands at the next game (“Sing with the Vodacom Bulls”, 2013). At the end of April 2013, the marketing team released another video where the players reinforced what the fans mean to them with a call-to-action for fans to attend the home stadium, Loftus Versveld, to see them in action (“We have the greatest fans”, 2013).

4.8.2.3 Sample method

Initially there was no complete list of the research population so a non-probability sample was used by the researcher and recruiter. According to Saunders and Lewis (2012) probability sampling can only be used when there is a complete sample frame. These authors went on to assert that purposive sampling is the most common form of non-probability sampling, particularly when selecting a small sample for qualitative research.

Therefore, the researcher’s judgement was used to determine which respondents would provide suitable answers and have the relevant experience of detachment to meet the research objectives of this study (Saunders & Lewis, 2012). The researcher deemed Blue Bulls lapsed STHs as suitable for this study since the team had faced fan loyalty issues. At the time of this research, the Blue Bulls were one of the teams in South Africa who were most likely to have detached fans who could contribute to this study.

Qualitative Quarter, a marketing research consultancy, was employed to recruit the respondents. The agency is a member of the South African Market Research Association (SAMRA). Using a judgment sampling technique, the recruiter was tasked to find lapsed Blue Bulls STHs and thereafter used convenience sampling to recruit the respondents who were willing and able to participate in the study (Saunders & Lewis, 2012).

The judgement criteria encompassed the following:

- The respondent should be a season ticket holder (STH) for longer than two years. As per the McDonald (2010) study, it is more likely that STHs churn in the first year. By ensuring that the respondent has been a season STH for an extended period, it indicates a prior strength of loyalty to the team.
- The reason for the respondent lapsing can be due to external factors such as commitments, cost, leisure alternatives, location, parking, participant sports and alternative sport entertainment (Kim and Trail, 2010).

The recruitment agency contacted each of the respondents telephonically to ascertain whether they were eligible based on the above criteria and requested their participation in the study. Post the first four interviews the recruiters struggled to find respondents who were loyal fans of the Blue Bulls and primary decision makers. The researcher then made contact with Blue Bulls management and obtained a list of lapsed STHs from the ticket office. A probability sampling technique was then employed as the recruiter telephoned respondents on the list to determine their eligibility and interest in being interviewed. A smaller random sample was drawn from the list and based on eligibility; the respondents were interviewed up until the point of saturation.

4.8.2.4 Sample size

In qualitative research it is important to select a sample which fairly represents the population of interest in the study. According to Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006) there are no clear parameters for determining the sample size for non-probabilistic samples. In the case of a purposive sample, the size is reliant on the level of “saturation”, or rather that point at which no new themes are observed in the data. Although the concept of saturation is helpful at a conceptual level, it provides little guidance regarding how large the sample size is prior to the study. The researcher ensured that the transcripts were analysed at intervals to determine the point of saturation where no new themes emerged and the sample size was judged to be optimal.

4.9 Data collection

4.9.1 An overview of the process

Once the recruiters secured the list of respondents based on the sampling criteria, primary research was conducted through a process of semi-structured, face-to-face

and telephonic interviews with respondents. In order to build rapport with the respondents, the face-to-face method of interviewing was preferred to the telephonic method, which was not deemed to be as personal as the former collection technique. However, Cachia and Millward (2011) found that the benefit of telephonic discussions is that they naturally follow an agenda-driven format, similar to semi-structured interviews. These authors also proposed that interview modality and the telephonic method are complementary in nature.

The interviews were in-depth in nature in order for the researcher to effusively understand the determinants and process of sports fan detachment. Saunders and Lewis (2012) stated that a semi-structured interview is based on significant constructs utilising pre-determined themes. The researcher aimed to cover all themes based on the research propositions but the order of the questions changed from interview to interview based on the flow of the discussion.

As per Saunders and Lewis (2012), the following process was followed by the recruiter and researcher:

1. The researcher provided the recruiter with pre-interview documentation prior to engaging with the respondents. The corresponding documents can be viewed in **Appendix 1 and 2**.
2. The recruiter contacted the respondents, explained the nature of the research and invited them to take part in the study. A clear explanation of the time required, together with the fact that there was no incentive for participation, was provided.
3. Once the respondent agreed to take part, a convenient time and place was determined for the interview. The pre-interview pack was then sent to the respondent in preparation for the appointment.
4. For four of the 10 interviews, the researcher arrived early on the day to ensure that the room was quiet and to test all recording equipment. For the 10 telephonic interviews, the researcher ensured that a quiet room was booked and the audio of the teleconference facility was optimal for voice recording purposes.
5. The researcher conducted the interview by following the guide in **Appendix 2**. Some of the questions were pre-planned while others were used to probe the respondent in order to gain greater understanding around the topic under discussion.

6. The researcher made notes and used an iPad voice recorder to record the respondents' answers.

The flow and structure of the interview guide used in this study was based on Du Preez (2012) and Saunders and Lewis (2012) and can be viewed in **Appendix 2**. The interviews were approximately 40 minutes in length and were transcribed after each interview session. In order to ascertain the saturation point, the interviews were analysed at intervals to interrogate the salient themes and identify any new themes which had emerged. A previously used transcription protocol was utilised by the transcriber (See **Appendix 4**).

4.9.2 The interview guide design

As Du Preez (2012) propounded, the interview guide was designed based on the propositions defined in Chapter 3, which were derived from the literature review in Chapter 2. **Table 5** summarises the link between the research propositions and the questions which the respondents were asked.

Table 4 The research propositions and aligned interview questions

Research proposition	Questions
<p>Proposition 1 The sports fan dissolution process follows a three part process of dissolution (breakdown trigger, breakdown phase, determinant incident), exit and post-dissolution phases as per the consumer / service provider detachment process.</p>	<p>Researcher: Please tell me, what was the initial incident or reason which caused you to want to suspend your season ticket? Researcher: Probe further around the event that triggered the breakdown phase of the process. Researcher: Please tell me all of the events that led up to you terminating your season ticket with the Blue Bulls. Probe from the initial trigger to the actual termination and post termination.</p>
<p>Proposition 2 (1) Unmet expectations of team performance, (2) the appearance of attractive sport or team alternatives and (3) changes in team liking criteria trigger the dissolution process for an allegiant or attached sports fan to become detached from his team.</p>	<p>Researcher: Probe whether there was a process of reducing liking or loyalty. Researcher: Probe if and how the respondent moved from one team to supporting another team. If so, probe the underlying reasons for the change. Researcher: Prove whether the respondent believes there are attractive alternatives to their current team.</p>
<p>Proposition 3 The breakdown phase of sports fan detachment is iterative in nature to break the bonds with the sports object</p>	<p>Researcher: Please tell me if there was any time in the process where it took you some time to make sense of what was happening? Probe whether there were any parts of the process which were iterative.</p>
<p>Proposition 4 The sports fan dissolution process of detachment is sequential in nature.</p>	<p>Researcher: To deduce if any steps in the conceptual model were or were not followed in a sequential manner. Probe respondent if identified.</p>

4.9.3 Confidentiality and anonymity

As per the Integrative Business Research Project Regulations (2013), an informed consent letter was presented to the respondents and signed or verbally agreed to indicate consent prior to participating in the interview process. The consent letter used for this study can be viewed in **Appendix 1**. According to Corden and Sainsbury (2006), names used in reporting can be pseudonyms to retain anonymity. In the reporting of the research findings in this study, a pseudonym has been selected based on the last letter of the respondent's name and is aligned with the gender of the respondent.

4.10 Recording and managing data

As per Marshall and Rossman (2006) the data was recorded in a systematic manner which included a voice recorder and rough notes on points, where permitted with the

respondents' consent. In order to ensure that the iPad voice recorder was reliable, the audio files were labelled appropriately and the recorder was tested in advance. An alternative recorder was available in the event of any issues arising from faulty technology. The data was then converted from audio files into a transcription for analysis.

According to Miles and Huberman (1994) the idea of data management is familiar to quantitative researchers as they have experience in data recording, labelling, cleaning and documentation. However, data management is just as important for qualitative researchers with the main issues for the researcher being to ensure: (a) high-quality data which is accessible, (b) documentation of what analyses have been carried out, (c) retention of data and associated analyses after the study has been completed.

According to Marshall and Rossman (2006) to ensure that the data is easy to retrieve, the researcher needs to pre-determine a list of categories to code data. This list assisted in the retrieval and access to the data. However, to maintain qualitative principles, the researcher reserved the right to change the coding as more data became available. ATLAS.ti software was used to assist with the process of coding. The interview transcripts and documentation of analyses were stored in a number of places including on the researcher's company network, the researcher's personal computer and in a number of cloud locations such as Dropbox and Google Documents. This was to ensure that data could not be lost and could be retrieved over time.

4.11 Data analysis

4.11.1 An overview of the process

According to Basit (2003, p.143) the process of qualitative analysis "is a dynamic, intuitive and creative process of inductive reasoning, thinking and theorising." In order to make sense of raw data, it was required to be systematically analysed to illuminate the topic under consideration. A process of content analysis was followed in order to assign codes and categorisation of the data to define units of meaning (Basit, 2003). Marshall and Rossman (2006) asserted that the analytic process falls into six definitive categories; (1) creating order in the data, (2) a deep immersion into the data, (3) the generation of categories and themes, in this instance based on the conceptual model developed, (4) offering interpretations via notes and memos, (5) searching for alternative understandings of the process and (6) writing the report.

4.11.2 Content analysis approach

According to Basit (2003) analysis and coding are not synonymous with each other, although coding is an essential aspect of analysis. Data analysis takes place throughout the research project, while coding takes place once the raw data is available for review. Electronic methods are increasingly used by researchers and in this study, specialist qualitative data analysis software (ATLAS. ti) was employed to code the interview transcripts.

According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), content analysis refers to the process which is used by researchers to interpret meaning from the content of interview transcripts. These authors defined three approaches: conventional, directed and summative which differ based on coding schemes, the origin of the codes and threats to the trustworthiness of the data. The conventional approach derives coding categories directly from the data, while summative content analysis involves counting data and comparisons, usually of keywords, followed by an interpretation by the researcher of the underlying context.

In the context of this study, a directed content analysis approach was the most appropriate because the research propositions are based on a conceptual model. The analysis commenced based on theory as guidance for the initial codes. Miles and Huberman (1994) stated that there are two methods to assign codes to the data. The first one relies on inductive reasoning whereby none of the codes are pre-defined and are derived from the data by extracting crucial themes and categorisations from the data. The second, and preferred method by Miles and Huberman (1994), is the deductive method which pre-defines the codes up-front, based on the conceptual framework, research questions, hypothesis and problem areas which the research brings into the study.

Since this study is largely based on the conceptual framework defined at the end of Chapter 2, a start list of codes was pre-determined for review and coding purposes and can be viewed in **Appendix 3**.

4.11.3 Data coding process

Basit (2003) defined an electronic coding process that formed the framework for coding in this study. As mentioned, the interviews were voice recorded and transcribed verbatim by Qualitative Quarter in a Microsoft Word document format. The transcription protocol followed by the transcriber can be found in **Appendix 4**. The rich data was then coded using ATLAS ti. software. The first step was to load ATLAS ti. onto the

computer and then to create a project called *Sports Fan Detachment*. The interview transcripts were then saved as Rich Text Files (RTF) and imported into the software programme.

Since the codes had been pre-determined, these were set up as an initial list in ATLAS ti. These codes were then assigned a position as the key code family and the top of the code *trees* that constituted a code listing for the project. The sub-categories were then defined under the main themes that they were related to and could be termed *child* codes. There were some code categorisations which did not link into the themes or *families* and these were assigned as *free* codes (Basit, 2003).

Coding was then carried out by highlighting segments of text and assigning a specific theme or sub-category code to the quotation. The extract and the code were then linked and highlighted in a specific colour to indicate the coding. The text in the entire document was assigned codes in a similar fashion by linking text to *family*, *child* or *free* codes. Additional categories were realised through the coding process and these were added to the list throughout the iterative process (Basit, 2003). The codes were amended and changed as the process progressed and it was important that some flexibility was retained by the researcher when code lists were created (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

Once all the transcripts were coded, the ATLAS ti. report functions were used to extrapolate meaning from the data and coding. The next step was to re-contextualise the data by bringing together all the data with the same code. This was accomplished by using the searching, sorting and assembling functions of the computer software, as posited by Basit (2003).

4.12 Data validity and reliability

Saunders and Lewis (2012, p. 127) defined validity as “the extent to which (a) data collection method or methods accurately measure what they were intended to measure and (b) the research findings are really about what they profess to be about.” Validity was an important consideration because a variety of factors, when not controlled for, could result in the research findings being invalid. Johnson (1997) discussed three types of validity within the field of qualitative research; (1) descriptive validity, (2) interpretive validity and (3) theoretical validity. Each of these concepts are discussed below and the implications for this research project are defined as follows:

4.12.1 Descriptive validity

According to Johnson (1997) descriptive validity refers to the factual accuracy of the descriptive account by the respondent by the researcher. This is an important aspect of validity as description is an important objective of this research study. One of the strategies proposed by Johnson (1997) to obtain descriptive validity is called *investigator triangulation*. In the context of this research it was not possible to have multiple observers record and describe the respondents' thoughts, opinions and behaviours in relation to the research propositions which were being tested. Due to time, location and monetary resource constraints, the researcher did not have the opportunity to have an outsider corroborate the accuracy of reporting the facts. While the interview transcripts were made available to review the level of descriptive validity, the lack of *investigator triangulation* was deemed as a limitation of the research.

4.12.2 Interpretive validity

Johnson (1997) asserted that interpretive validity is obtained to the degree that the respondents' thoughts, opinions, intentions and experiences were suitably understood by the researcher. Accurate interpretation required the researcher to understand the respondents' inner world; the researcher was required to "get into their heads" to understand things from their perspective.

Participant feedback is an important strategy to ensure that the researcher has correctly interpreted the respondents' viewpoints and can clarify any areas of miscommunication. In the context of this study, the researcher ensured that significant concepts cited by respondents were repeated from the researcher's perspective to gauge the correct interpretation of the concepts communicated. Another strategy was to use *verbatim*s to explain the respondents' thoughts and feelings. The use of *verbatim*s is deemed a lowest inference descriptor since it is a direct quotation from the respondent (Johnson, 1997). This strategy was employed in Chapter 5 to discuss the research results and to conclude the findings.

4.12.3 Theoretical validity

Johnson (1997) explained that theoretical validity was obtained when the theoretical explanation or, in this case the conceptual model derived from theory, fits the data and was viewed as credible and robust. The first strategy proposed by Johnson (1997) to promote theoretical validity is *extended fieldwork*. This strategy proposes that the researcher should stay in field longer to ensure that the findings of the study are stable and to gain further understanding around relationships. In the context of this study, time

was limited so *extended fieldwork* was not an option and not employing this strategy could be deemed as a limitation of the study.

The second strategy defined by Johnson (1997) was *theory triangulation* which alludes to understanding the process of sports fan dissolution utilising a number of different theories. Theory triangulation was possible in this study as a number of dissolution process models were reviewed in order to derive the conceptual model that forms the basis of the research propositions. Each one of these theories was reviewed in the context of answering the research question. Another strategy to promote theoretical validity is *peer review* which pertains to spending time discussing the findings with colleagues and the researcher's supervisor. The researcher fully leveraged the feedback of the supervisor and also identified a peer to discuss the research challenges that were faced by the researcher in order to deliver theoretical validity.

Internal and external validity are also important considerations in qualitative research. The following discussion defines the constructs and outlines the implications of these types of validity on this research study:

4.12.4 Internal validity

Johnson (1997) stated that internal validity is not often within the ambit of qualitative research as makes reference to the degree to which a researcher can be certain that a relationship is causal. In the context of this study, the researcher was interested in identifying the specific triggers of the process of dissolution and to describe how the process operates. To ensure internal validity the researcher created a list of rival explanations for the trigger or cause of the dissolution process and tested them through the process of data analysis. Johnson (1997) also suggested using multiple data sources. In this case, lapsed Blue Bulls STHs who had differing tenures of association with the team provided multiple data sources required to promote internal validity.

4.12.5 External validity

According to Saunders and Lewis (2012) external validity refers to the extent to which the findings of the research are generalisable to other research contexts. According to Johnson (1997) generalisability is not a major purpose of qualitative research because the sample is not random and the results of the study cannot be seen as broadly applicable to theory. The aim of this study was to further understand the process of dissolution that detached sports fans undergo in relation to this specific research setting which cannot be considered as broadly generalisable to theory.

4.12.6 Reliability

Saunders and Lewis (2012, p. 128) defined reliability as “the extent to which data collection methods and analysis procedures will produce consistent findings.” These authors emphasised the principle factors that threaten research reliability and these are defined in **Table 6** together with the implications for this research study:

Table 5 Principal factors which threaten the reliability of research findings and conclusions (Saunders & Lewis, 2012)

Factor	Refers to	Strategies to promote reliability
Subject error	Measurement which may take place at different times.	Request for the appointment times to be in the afternoon after work.
Subject bias	Research subjects providing unreliable information because they think telling the truth may, for example, show them in a bad light.	Face-to-face and telephonic interview to build a rapport with the respondent and explain the importance of truthful answers. Signed consent letter to guarantee confidentiality of the respondents interview data.
Observer error	The way in which different researchers may, for example, ask the same questions in different ways, thus biasing the results.	The first interview to be treated as a pilot to lock down the semi-structured question set. Those questions highlighted in grey in Appendix 2 , are additions to the original question set. Acknowledgment that by virtue of the methodology of a semi-structured interview, no question will be asked exactly the same as probing will be required.
Observer bias	The way in which different researchers may interpret the same data in different ways, thus biasing the findings and conclusions.	Clear guidelines to be provided for the interview coding rationale. Acknowledgement that there will be some observer bias due to the background and experiences of the researcher in the marketing space.

4.13 Research limitations

A number of research limitations were identified, based on the previously defined methodological choices made for this study.

4.13.1 Directed content analysis shortfalls

According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005) using a theory approach can result in the researcher having a strong informed yet biased perspective. In this case the researcher found data or evidence to support the theory, or in this case, the conceptual model under consideration. Secondly, the researcher may have unconsciously introduced

bias in the probing questions which could have given the respondent a cue on how to answer the questions in a favourable light. Thirdly, an overemphasis on the conceptual model could have blinded the researcher to the contextual components of the process of dissolution for detached sports fans.

4.13.2 Interview shortfalls

Roulsten (2010) presented a number of limitations of the 'Neo-positivist' interview typology which were used in this research study. This author emphasises the following two main challenges in relation to the respondents: (1) research participants do not necessarily do what they say they do and (2) respondents may not remember the actual events which they are asked to recount and may not tell the truth or they may concoct a version of the events. In terms of challenges related to the researcher, the following points are articulated by the author: (1) the researcher's subjectivities may bias the interview and / or the researcher may misinterpret the respondents' responses, (2) the researcher may "lead" or influence the respondent's answers.

Marshall and Rossman (2006) also presented many limitations with respect to in-depth interviews. Firstly, these authors stated that co-operation is essential for robust findings as interviews are interpersonal in nature. Secondly, respondents may also feel uncomfortable sharing what the interviewer hopes to understand, or they may not be aware of reoccurring patterns in their lives. And finally, an interviewer with limited experience may not probe answers in a manner which inspires long narrative responses from the respondent.

4.13.3 Validity shortfalls

As mentioned in the discussion on validity, a number of strategies could not be used due to resource constraints. These included a risk to descriptive validity due to the lack of *investigator triangulation* as a result of budgetary constraints; this could be deemed as a limitation of the research. Another risk was to theoretical validity as time was limited so *extended fieldwork* was not an option and this may be deemed as a limitation of the study.

4.13.4 Sampling limitations

Sampling limitations included the fact that the full sample was a not based on a random group of respondents and is a blend of non-probability and probability sampling. The results of the study are not generalisable to theory without additional research. Another limitation was the fact that a combination of convenience and judgment purposive

sampling techniques were utilised and relied on subjective choices regarding the sample selection. This limited the validity of the findings.

CHAPTER 5: RESEARCH RESULTS

5.1 Introduction

Chapter 4 intrinsically explained the methodology employed to test the four research propositions that were defined in Chapter 3. Therefore, the presentation of results in this chapter is structured in accordance with the research propositions to ensure a clear link between the propositions and the findings of the qualitative research conducted.

The results presented in this chapter are the outcomes of 14 interviews conducted with Blue Bulls lapsed STHs over a period of two months. The interviews conducted were semi-structured and the questions were aligned with the research propositions, hence the research findings were summarised in accordance with the data collection tool. This chapter commences with an overview of the sample and the data analysis process followed by the researcher to infer findings from the interviews.

The findings for each research proposition are presented by discussing the salient themes that emerged from the data. Thereafter each theme is then dissected into sub-themes and the findings for each proposition is summarised in a conclusion for each topic.

5.2 Sample description

A total of 16 interviews were conducted with 14 Blue Bulls and two Golden Lions lapsed STHs over a period of eight weeks. A strategic challenge faced by the recruiters, Qualitative Quarter, was the ability to recruit Golden Lions lapsed STHs as access to these respondents proved to be limited. After three weeks of phone calls to Golden Lions management, the decision was taken to focus the sample on Blue Bulls respondents only. Another fundamental challenge that was identified was that certain respondents did not want to meet face-to-face and ultimately it was more convenient to conduct telephonic interviews. Four of the sixteen interviews were conducted face-to-face and the rest were conducted via a telephonic discussion. All interviews involved individuals who had been STHs for two years or longer.

A summary of the interview statistics can be found in **Table 7** below:

Table 6 Summary of Interview Statistics

Description	Quantity
Total number of interviews	14
Season ticket holder for longer than 2 years	7
Season ticket holder for less than 2 years	7
Primary decision maker	10
Secondary decision maker	4
Total length of all interviews	598.80 minutes
Average length of interviews	42.7 minutes
Longest interview	100.15 minutes
Shortest interview	20.48 minutes
Average length of transcripts	147 pages
Longest transcript	15 pages
Shortest transcript	8 pages

The above information classifies the respondents. The first classification is based on tenure as a ticket holder and the other is based on whether the respondent was the primary or secondary decision maker. Secondary decision makers either made the decision on behalf of the business they worked for or the decision was made by another individual on their behalf. Primary decision makers made the decision to not renew the season ticket and were responsible for the yearly payment.

All respondents accepted that their responses would be reported anonymously. However, a number of respondents requested that the researcher provided direct feedback to the Blue Bulls CEO, Barend van Graan. The feedback was disseminated in the form of this dissertation and confidentiality was retained.

5.3 Data Analysis

The data analysis methodology outlined in Chapter 4 was followed by the researcher in order to deliver substantive findings for this research. Firstly, interviews reached saturation point and the number of 14 interviews were deemed sufficient for the response rate. In order to determine the saturation point for the sample, the interview transcripts were analysed iteratively at three intervals; after four interviews, then the next six interviews and finally after the last four interviews.

Post analysis of the first four interviews, new codes were added to the start code list in **Appendix 3**. However, no new code families were created as clear patterns in the data were yet to emerge. The following six interviews gave rise to new code families such as *team repertoire* and *negative drivers* classifications, together with a number of new child codes within each family. The last four interviews gave rise to no new code

families and two additional child codes and this indicated to the researcher that saturation within the sample had been reached.

Since the interviews were in-depth and required a certain level of probing, the questions were not asked in the same order every time. While the majority of the respondents answered all the questions, the level of detail provided fluctuated, depending on their level of comfort with the interview and the respondents' proficiency in English. Each interview was recorded by the researcher with the permission of the respondent. The interviews were then sent for transcription in accordance with the protocol identified in **Appendix 4**.

The transcripts were then analysed utilising content analysis, in particular directed content analysis. A start list of codes was outlined, based on the conceptual model identified in Chapter 2 and a deductive approach of analysis followed. As the data was coded new categories emerged and were included in the start list. The full list of codes can be reviewed in **Appendix 3**. The interview transcripts were imported into ATLAS.ti version 7 software to code the data by means of categorising the quotes into child codes, families and super families based on the fan detachment themes identified in the research propositions. The coding largely aligned with the conceptual model to test the validity of the framework.

For the purposes of confidentiality the identity of the respondents was not revealed. However, a pseudonym was selected based on the criteria presented in Chapter 4. This approach is aligned with the statement in the informed consent letter presented prior to each interview and is also required to limit subject bias as outlined in the research methodology in Chapter 4. The research results are presented in a manner which assists the flow and continuity of the report by using a pseudonym in order to ensure that each respondent cannot be identified. A list of respondent pseudonyms and the associated interview transcript codes are available for review in **Appendix 5**.

5.4 Research Results for Research Proposition 1

5.4.1 Introduction and synopsis of results

The sports fan dissolution process follows a three part process of dissolution, exit and post dissolution phases in the process of sports fan detachment. Findings clearly revealed that a phase of dissolution was prevalent amongst the lapsed STHs and the phase continued up until the point that renewals were due for the upcoming season. The exit process was largely aligned with the process of renewal for the next season,

however, it was largely characterised by inaction on the respondents' part. The post-dissolution phase followed the exit stage where lapsed STHs had not renewed their season tickets for the following fiscal year.

The following tables summarise the findings, including illustrative quotes from a snapshot of four respondents for each phase of the dissolution process. Each three part process is similar; however, there are differences in the manner in which each respondent passes between the stages.

Table 7 Key illustrative quotes - Eugene

Dissolution Process Phases	Illustrative quotes
Breakdown trigger	<i>Yes, after I had both my season tickets for about two years I just renewed one. I kept one season ticket for 2 or 3 seasons, because my lady friend actually stays in Alberton and it's sometimes a bit of a hassle to drive there and bring her to the rugby and take her back again and so on. So very often at that stage when I still had two tickets I found myself going on my own with an empty seat next to me. (P5, 43:43)</i>
Breakdown phase	<i>No, it was a gradual process, since I retired I had more time for holidays and so on, which I did not have when I was working full-time. (P5, 96:99)</i>
Determinant incident	<i>I think it was mainly that one, where it was quite a long holiday, 6 weeks away. (P5, 109:112)</i>
Exit phase	<i>It's an easy process to stop with it, you just opt out, you just don't renew it, they do send you a couple of reminders or whatever. (P5, 39:39)</i>
Post dissolution phase	<i>I then thought – maybe I can always – if there is a game I really want to see I can always arrange a ticket and then just go for that once or twice. (P5, 101:101)</i>

The above illustrative quotes demonstrate that Eugene followed a clear process of sports fan detachment as demonstrated by each of the phases of dissolution. Eugene's trigger was a lack of someone to attend the games with. He then went on to purchase only one ticket but during a gradual and extended breakdown phase of the process, he found that he was not able to attend the games due to various holidays he had planned. The determinant incident is linked to a cost / benefit analysis which was triggered after a six week holiday in Namibia. His exit stage is largely characterised as a passive decision on his part and post dissolution, Eugene still intends to attend Blue Bulls games. This demonstrates that he still has a relatively strong attachment to the team and the process of dissolution was relatively weak.

While each of the quotes above hint at a linear three stage process, each of these limits the summary to a snapshot view of each phase and does not provide evidence regarding the iterative nature of Eugene’s dissolution process. A number of basic negative drivers came into play during the breakdown phase and these will be elaborated upon in the findings for Proposition 3 which proposes that the breakdown phase is iterative in nature.

Table 8: Key illustrative quotes - Nicole

Dissolution Process Phases	Illustrative quotes
Breakdown trigger	<i>On one occasion I can recall that I nominated certain customers to attend and I sent someone on my behalf to be a host for the day. A few of the customers attended, however they sent somebody in replacement for them or they would send a family member. (P4, 64:65)</i>
Breakdown phase	<i>I did, if it was a lesser game for the lack of a better word, they would not be that keen, they would actually come up with various reasons for not attending, they would say – we don’t want to watch that game or we don’t support that team or whatever, that did happen, yes. (P4, 68:68)</i>
Determinant incident	<i>I had given it thought during the year, I probably took the decision, my assistant asked me what we were going to do. I don’t know how long it took. I would not say it was a long decision - I had my facts in place so I could make it pretty quickly. (P4, 90:91)</i>
Exit phase	<i>I did not really think about it until it actually came up, I was asked to renew and at that stage of the year we are all busy with budgeting and targeting. (P4, 73:73)</i>
Post dissolution phase	<i>I still stick with my decision, I think going forward when that decision needs to be taken again for the next year then we will need to renew the current status in terms of our return on investment. We will also possibly get feedback from customers who have been attending games at the suites and get their view on it. (P4, 84:85)</i>

In Nicole’s case the breakdown trigger was related to the non-attendance of games by her clients. Like Eugene, Nicole stated that the breakdown phase was iterative as she thought about not renewing the season tickets for some time as clients continued to decline the games. The respondent’s determinant incident was a question posed by her assistant during the company’s budgeting cycle which triggered a cost / benefit analysis. The exit phase she followed is less clear in this instance, as she was not contacted by the Blue Bulls ticket office and did not communicate her intent not to renew. Nicole indicated some re-patronage intension in the post dissolution phase but

the dissolution process is thought to be relatively strong based on the number of hurdles she has articulated. Inconsistent client attendance was the key driver of her decision not to renew the season ticket, while Eugene quoted a range of different factors.

Table 9 Key illustrative quotes - Ruaan

Dissolution Process Phases	Illustrative quotes
Breakdown trigger	<i>The first thing that we said to each other was that we don't like the style of rugby that the Bulls are playing, especially the so called kick and chase rugby. (P13, 33:33)</i>
Breakdown phase	<i>I think it built up over time, during the season we would say – we are getting sick of this kick and drive type of rugby. We would one day say – why are there no curtain raisers and so on. In the end, when this thing happened – this person and his two boys who sat there, he had the rudest language. I think that was the tipping point. (P13, 89:90)</i>
Determinant incident	<i>I then decided if this is what it is going to be like I am not going to go any more. There is no control over who enters the main grandstand and who sits where. (P13, 48:49)</i>
Exit phase	<i>The factors that I mentioned to you came up in our discussion. We decided not to renew and I can tell you it was really sad, we took the decision and we did not feel good about it at all, the children were very surprised. (P13, 86:87)</i>
Post dissolution phase	<i>We are still watching the Bulls, we are definitely supporters. We have been watching it on TV with friends. We will go to friends and have a braai and watch the rugby and so on. We have never been back to Loftus, we have never bought a ticket for a particular game. (P13, 119:122)</i>

Ruaan was very clear that the breakdown trigger was unmet player performance but like Eugene, he also listed a number of negative factors which came into play during the breakdown phase. He alluded to this in the above quote with respect to the breakdown phase. The respondent's determinant incident was clearly linked to seating in the stadium and the exit phase was quoted as being particularly tough for the respondent. Interestingly his re-patronage intention is limited and this could be as a result of an iterative process over time which has resulted in the need to actively cut ties with the team. This indicated a weaker level of attachment and a strong overall dissolution process.

Table 10 Key illustrative quotes - Sean

Dissolution Process Phases	Illustrative quotes
Breakdown trigger	<i>And when he got there on one occasion the seats were occupied by some guys and they did not want to leave, that was not nice, at the end of the day a fight broke out, that was a negative thing. (P16, 177:178)</i>
Breakdown phase	<i>I was watching them on TV but I could not get there. I am in Johannesburg and my work situation is that I can't see all the games, I would say the previous year I saw maybe 50% of the games. (P16, 192:194)</i>
Determinant incident	<i>I went to the USA for quite a long time, I was there in May and June, I decided before I went not to renew, I knew I would not be here to see their games. (P16, 30:30)</i>
Exit phase	<i>I am not sure if it was a phone call or maybe an email, I think it was an email, it was an email. (P16, 144:146)</i>
Post dissolution phase	<i>I don't need encouragement, it's a question of – I have not got the time at this stage, the encouragement is there, if I had the time I would be glad to do it. At this stage time is really a problem for me. (P16, 222:224)</i>

Sean's process was relatively obvious, much like Nicole's. A negative incident linked to seating was the trigger for this respondent. The breakdown phase was characterised by a lack of time to attend games and ultimately a trip to the USA triggered a cost / benefit analysis much like the other respondents. During the exit phase, the Blue Bulls ticket office did contact him but the decision was made. Sean's re-patronage intention is positive and he indicated a relatively strong level of attachment however; he cited time as his main barrier to attendance. The process of dissolution is thought to be relatively weak in this particular case.

The above findings are elaborated upon as each stage of the dissolution process is unpacked further. The remainder of this Chapter discusses each of the phases comprehensively, utilising quotes from the respondents to support the results.

5.4.2 The breakdown trigger

The breakdown trigger is defined as the incident which triggers or commences the dissolution process and results in the STH not renewing his ticket for the following fiscal. **Table 11** below outlines selected verbatim quotes from each respondent which indicates an incident or event that triggered the process:

Table 11 Summary of selected verbatim quotes illustrating the breakdown trigger

Respondent	Verbatim Response
Anna	<i>Money [inaudible segment]... buying season tickets you can't get all the games anymore because your life changes and I have to work more hours. So it is a better to buy a ticket over Computicket or something and just go watch the one game that you want to watch with friends. (Anna, P1, 88:88)</i>
Nathan	<i>Yes, I got quite busy and so did (my girlfriend). We will take that up as soon as we can. (P2, 83:83)</i>
Teunis	<i>The crowd and...not all of them but there are always one or two guys who are drunk and they just take it too far, then the biggest thing was my shift work also. (P3, 80:80)</i>
Nicole	<i>On one occasion I can recall that I nominated certain customers to attend and I sent someone on my behalf to be a host for the day. A few of the customers attended, however they sent somebody in replacement for them or they would send a family member. (P4, 64:65)</i>
Eugene	<i>In 2010 I still had two season tickets. Then it was the awkwardness of always getting someone to come with me or get my lady friend and collect her and take her to the rugby and take her back again and everything. Then in 2011 I actually then decided to renew the one ticket only.(P5,114:115)</i>
Brian	<i>He has been looking for years, prior to Australia and Canada, it was almost a case of – this could be our last season and that was from 2010 onwards, then in 2012 he got the news that his papers had been accepted for Canada and they would be going within the year. (P6, 108:108)</i>
Nigel	<i>“It started to go south when the very first game we went to watch we could not get access, there was a problem with the tickets...” (P7, 33:33)</i>
Dean	<i>“But it’s not like it was three or four years ago to be honest with you. Years ago there was a real demand, that is why we bought season tickets, but I think there was a definite decline in the guy’s wanting to go to rugby. Maybe it is the price of fuel? Remember the guys have to get here themselves and maybe that played a part in it. (P8, 184:186)</i>
Sarie	<i>Last year June there was a lot of stuff happening in my life with my family and with my work and the little business. I'm running it got too much for me and everything was on top of each other because I lost a lot of family members in one month. (P11, 176:176)</i>
Nico	<i>The one thing I am happy about is that there is no more smoking allowed - that used to drive me insane. (P12, 99:99)</i>
Ruaan	<i>The first thing that we said to each other was that we don't like the style of rugby that the Bulls are playing, especially the so called kick and chase rugby, then once they have the ball it's this kick and drive, kick and drive, they don't use their back line which we</i>

Respondent	Verbatim Response
	<i>thought was perfect... (P13, 33:33)</i>
Elan	<i>I think it was when the boys started playing cricket, I missed at least half of the games, it cost me a lot of money, I can rather spend that money on cricket equipment and extra lessons and stuff, instead of going to half of the games. (P14, 83:83)</i>
Stefan	<i>In one game the people were smoking, you sit in the open but the person in front of you smoked all the time, that is very difficult. I did not want to sit there with that and then were drunk people around and they were swearing and making a noise – I had my kids with me, it was not nice. I am talking about 2-3 years ago when that happened. I really did not enjoy that at all. (P15, 144:150)</i>
Sean	<i>One of my friends, he is actually a province supporter but he also decided to get a few season tickets next to me, in the same row that I was sitting in. And when he got there on one occasion the seats were occupied by some guys and they did not want to leave, that was not nice, at the end of the day a fight broke out, that was a negative thing. (P16, 176:178)</i>

There were many types of triggers cited by respondents. Many triggers were classified as external constraints such as time constraints due to work commitments, lack of someone to attend events with, and family issues. Respondents also cited a number of internal constraints such as unmet team performance and particular negative experiences at the Loftus stadium such as drunk spectators, seating issues and smoking in the stadium. These findings are discussed further in the review of results for Proposition 2.

While the particular trigger is different for each respondent, there is clearly a situation which triggers the dissolution process which causes a reappraisal of the current situation. In the case of Anna and Elan, the trigger started a process of cost / benefit analysis of the season ticket by the respondent. As situations occur, they trigger a review of the current benefits accrued versus the relative cost.

5.4.3 The breakdown phase

Proposition 3 aims to establish whether the breakdown phase is iterative in nature and this is discussed in Chapter 5.6. The following review of the results focuses primarily on the characteristics of the breakdown phase as opposed to the process which is covered later.

The breakdown phase defined in the conceptual model in Chapter 2 is an extended phase characterised by both positive and negative experiences. The breakdown phase follows the breakdown trigger and continues until the determinant incident which is the

decision that spurs on the respondent to take action, or in this case, to remain inactive by not renewing the season ticket for the following fiscal during the exit phase. There are a number of factors at play within this phase; including the negative drivers that the respondents experienced, the amount of deliberation that respondents underwent from the breakdown trigger to a determinant incident and the change in behavioural loyalty experienced during the phase.

On closer review of the process followed, there was a difference detected in the breakdown phase between respondents who were secondary decision makers and those who were STHs for less than two years, versus respondents who had been STHs for longer than two years. Six of the seven STHs who had their season ticket for over two years, had retained their tickets for 10 years and longer.

5.4.3.1 Negative drivers experienced

The first factor to be discussed is the negative drivers that respondents experienced during the breakdown phase. Overall, respondents who had been STHs for longer than two years mentioned a range of negative drivers including drunken fans, changes to the coach, the fact that they were not valued by Blue Bulls management and parking issues experienced at Loftus Versveld Stadium.

I am not...I don't use alcohol and when that is hanging around, I can't handle it. That was the main reason I think. (Teunis, P3, 78:78)

With the coaches now, that is when it changed - the kicking game is not on for me. Rugby is more than just kicking the ball. I don't like it at all, not at all. (Stefan, P15, 90:92)

If I look at other institutions and maybe something totally different, being a member of the Book Club, Leeserkring, they keep track of your membership and they acknowledge you have been a member for 30 years, the AA, the automobile association, they acknowledge the length of your membership, you get a special sticker, I am not a member for 45 years, I get a sticker saying 45 which I can display on my car's window. I think that means something to a person, you know, just to get that little acknowledgement – we know that you have been a supporter for so many years you know. (Eugene, P5, 83:83)

Yes, parking has always been an issue. You try and park as close to the stadium as possible but that depends on what time you go there, but then you still have these industrious guys who are trying to take a chance and make a quick buck, that has been like that for as long as I can remember.(Brian, P6,

173:174)

This was in contrast to short term STHs who mostly mentioned drunken fans and safety as being the key negative drivers.

It's not that you feel unsafe there because they will give attention to it but that stadium is so big they can't put security in each line or people standing there to navigate okay. Then they need a hundred and a hundred and a more hundred to work for them at the stadiums to keep everyone safe. They can't do that. I don't think they will do that in any case because actually basically I don't know, everybody is there on their own risk so they have to look after themselves. And I won't say I feel unsafe but in the long run you do because everybody gets there sober then they start braaiing and drinking and stuff like that. (Sarie, P11, 128:128)

There are two possible explanations for this finding that long term STHs cite as range of negative drivers; (1) that tenure plays a role in that there was a longer period for these individuals to have negative experience or (2) that it takes many cumulative negative experiences for these respondents to decide to lapse in purchasing a season ticket. The long term STHs stated that they were allegiant fans, so the latter explanation is more plausible as it would take multiple negative experiences for the bond to start being broken with a highly attached or allegiant fan.

5.4.3.2 Period of deliberation prior to decision

The second factor for discussion is the amount of deliberation which took place between the idea of not renewing being triggered and the act of not renewing the season ticket. Long term STHs tended to mention higher levels of deliberation more so than their short term counterparts. This finding is aligned with the above premise that it would take a longer period of deliberation for an attached or allegiant fan to break their bond, in this case not renewing their season ticket, with the Blue Bulls team.

Yes I did. I was trying to see if there was another way where other friends can go because I was missing it. I was missing what I had, the enjoyment, the social. Everything just went dead so yes there was missing it. I was looking at options but there wasn't at that time any friends or relationships that could support me. (Anna, P1, 212:212)

No, because it was actually a phasing out process for me, over a couple of years, having had the two tickets for a long time, then during that time my lady friend attended the rugby with me, then it was by mutual agreement that we

both decided that it was not worthwhile me renewing her ticket so I just phased that ticket out and I went for one ticket. Then obviously other factors came in, I had to also go alone, that is not as pleasant as going with someone, it was a gradual process but it was not a spur of the moment thought, at the end of the season you have to decide to either renew or not renew, it came over quite a long time. (Eugene, P5, 169:169)

That's the other thing, we always would debate whether we would get seasonal tickets but inevitably we knew we would, but it was a case of should we, shouldn't we, then we would weigh up how many games we would go to, are we going to make use of it for the Currie Cup, etc. etc. So it was always...just before cut off for seasonal ticket renewal we would always renew. (Brian, P6, 112:113)

5.4.3.3 Changes in behavioural loyalty

Thirdly, the breakdown phase is characterised by a change in behavioural loyalty by respondents. This is largely based on the breakdown trigger, especially if the trigger is due to time limitation as a result of family or work commitments. **Table 12** below is a summary of responses which cite a change in behavioural loyalty post the breakdown trigger:

Table 12 Summary of responses citing behavioural loyalty declines

Respondent	Illustrative verbatim quotes
Anna	<i>No that was like the last time that I went. I haven't had a chance at all to go after that.(P1, 184:184)</i>
Teunis	<i>Not specifically at that time, it was before then, I started thinking it's not worthwhile to go to all the time to do it, it's much easier to sit here. It is much easier to sit here and look at it on the television, even now I have not got time to sit and look at the game on the TV.(P3, 101:102)</i>
Brian	<i>In 2007 we got our season tickets and in 2008 there was this great expectation around the Bulls, they went through a slump, I actually remember one Friday night, it sounds funny but I was one of those guys who was happy to wear the Bulls shirt, the helmet with the horns, the flag, in 2008, one Friday nights, I think it was against the Hurricanes, I was our first or second home game of the season and the Bulls got thrashed by them. With 10 minutes left to the game the stadium was almost empty, my friend and I actually left a lot of our stuff there, the flags, the hats, we left them on the seats and left. (P6, 62:62)</i>
Dean	<i>When there is a big game then there was a big rush for the tickets, that guy wants 15 tickets and we only have 10, so we would buy another 5, but the rest of the games it did not work, at one stage we went to braai in the parking area before the game and it just never materialised again, so we thought – no let's stop that, it's expensive to be honest. Mining is not that great at the moment.(P8, 82:82)</i>
Nico	<i>This season I don't have my season ticket, and last season I hardly went to games. We could not go to the games on a Friday night for religious reasons.(P12, 93:94)</i>
Elan	<i>Unfortunately the cricket determined when I could go to rugby. The matches are not always in Pretoria so we have to travel to play cricket, by the time you get back half the game of rugby is finished or I have missed the full game.(P14, 89:90)</i>
Stefan	<i>There is no difference, it took me 3 or 4 years to decide that I am not going to go anymore, I did not go that often in the past, it was just worthwhile going. (P15, 183:183)</i>
Sean	<i>I have not got time, the first year I maybe went to 50% of the games, then last year it was about 30% of the games, I saw about 50% of the Super 15 games, I saw maybe 10% of the Blue Bulls games, then the next year I saw 30% and 10% again. Then I made a decision not to renew as I did not have time.(P16, 324:324)</i>

There were limited mentions of a decline in attitudinal loyalty by respondents which indicated that while they attended fewer games over time as STHs, the respondents were still very loyal to the Blue Bulls. Overall, the majority of mentions denoted a strong attachment to the Blue Bulls which demonstrates that while respondents' tickets to games had lapsed, it did little to erode their loyalty to their team.

5.4.4 The determinant incident and exit phase

While the determinant incident and exit phase have been divided in the conceptual model developed in Chapter 2, the findings indicated that in some instances there was a clear determinant incident, while in others the decision not to renew was taken over time. The respondents then had to consciously consider whether they would renew or not and a stage of deliberation ensued. The below **Table 13** summarises respondents' who noted a determinant incident or event.

Table 13 Summary of determinant incident noting by respondents

Respondents	Determinant Incident	No Incident
# of Respondents	10	4

Respondents cited a range of specific incidents or events that included:

- a) During the company's budgeting cycle an assistant asked whether a decision needed to be made regarding renewal.
- b) A six week holiday to Namibia and a trip to the USA resulted in two respondents taking the decision not to renew.
- c) An altercation with the Marketing Manager of the Blue Bulls was the final activity in a number of unfortunate incidents with stadium management.
- d) The respondent's friend with whom he attended games called to say he had decided not to renew his season ticket.
- e) The respondent had started studying and on review of the number of Saturday's available to attend games, it was not deemed to be worthwhile.
- f) An incident at a game where a *Stormers* supporter sat in the wrong seats and the respondent had an altercation with the fan in front of his kids.
- g) The respondent had a conversation with her partner expressing the fact that she did not want to attend games any longer.
- h) The Blue Bulls management sent a letter for renewal to one respondent and called another respondent for renewal. These were deemed as the determinant incidents.

In some cases the determinant incident was merely a decision that happened over a period of deliberation. In the case of Anna, Nathan and Elan, they had deliberated for some time about the decision and then decided not to renew without a specific incident triggering them to make to the decision. In the case of Nathan and Elan, a number of

contextual constraints and negative factors had built up over time driving the decision not to renew their season ticket. Only incidents cited by Nigel and Ruaan were related to direct negative experiences with the Blue Bulls. The remainder of the incidents cited were due to contextual constraints and challenges. The significant finding is that the determinant incident is more likely to be a decision trigger as opposed to a specific event or incident.

The determinant incident is characterised to a greater degree as triggering a cost / benefit analysis process. While this process has been cited as characterising the breakdown trigger, it is more commonly cited by respondents post the breakdown phase at the point of the decision trigger.

I think at that stage, when that decision was taken we were all in a process of cost saving and making sure that the decision we made we were able to get a return on the investment. (Nicole, P4, 39:39)

My reason was partly financial, I am a pensioner now, I have been a pensioner for about 3 years. (Eugene, P5, 43:43)

Price wise they are more than 50% more than any other franchise. You can buy the top season ticket at the Sharks, Stormers, Lions and it will cost you about R3200, here it is over R5000, but they have the advantage that the Blue Bulls have won two super rugby championships already, that counts in their favour. But if they want to exploit that then they must market it correctly, they must give the people what they are asking for, they are asking for prime seating. (Nigel, P7, 45:46)

The exit phase is largely a passive phase and does not require an active termination of the season ticket as respondents could let it lapse without notifying the Blue Bulls management. Respondents stated that they had received calls and letters from the ticket office but there had been no further follow up from the management teams. The below comments summarise the above findings:

It's an easy process to stop with it, you just opt out, you just don't renew it, they do send you a couple of reminders or whatever. (Eugene, P5, 39:39)

I got an email to say – you can renew by a certain date and I got another email later on, it's just a standard, automated email, it was not personalised at all, it went out to all the ticket holders. (Nigel, P7, 133:133)

Around about October, we didn't cancel it, we just never renewed it. You have to renew it in about October, November at the latest. We had nice tickets, it was

nice tickets and we just never renewed them. Then they started phoning us and saying – please renew or do you want to renew and we said no we are not interested. (Dean, P8, 102:102)

Many respondents were unclear about when the ticket was up for renewal and had not been contacted by the Blue Bulls ticket office to remind them to renew the ticket. In effect, for these respondents there was no clear exit phase as defined in the conceptual model.

5.4.5 The post dissolution phase

A number of factors characterise the post dissolution phase which is defined in this study as the period after the season ticket holder's renewal lapses. In this phase STHs experienced affective feelings and offered cognitive reinforcement of the decision, exhibited lower levels of behavioural loyalty and typically demonstrated positive re-patronage intent. However, this is generally expressed only once the constraints have disappeared. Each of these factors are discussed further below.

5.4.5.1 Emotional intensity

STHs, who had a longer tenure than two years, cited stronger emotions than STHs of less than two years. The lead emotions felt in the post dissolution phase ranged from feeling guilty that they let down their team by not supporting them at the games, to sadness and disappointment with respect to not having been contacted by management to renew. There is a definitive longing to be back watching the game live for these respondents. The following comments from respondents illustrated the range of emotions felt by long term STHs:

Yes, because you are not supporting them you feel like you are letting them down a bit. I am letting them a bit down, I am not there to support them or try to give advice maybe. You get disappointed and heartbroken, you really get heart broken, you get so involved, it's like a lady with their soapies, they will not miss it. That is what they like, that is what we are like with rugby. (Nathan, P2, 213:214; 329:329)

Sometimes when you sit here and you see the game and you see the crowd, you get that eish feeling, I want to go back but... (Teunis, P3, 117:117)

We did not feel good about it, that I can tell you. We knew that we were going to miss the enjoyment of watching the rugby first hand, there is a real difference watching it on TV and being there, we knew we were going to miss it, but as I

*said we are street wise and we have been there, done it and got the T-shirt.
(Riaan, P13, 116:117)*

*Basically I feel a bit sad about the fact that there is nothing from the Rugby Union side to enquire what was your reasons or if there were any reasons.
(Eugene, P5, 39:39)*

Apart from the money, there is almost a feeling of guilt, my team is playing and I am not there to support them. (Eugene, P5, 131:133)

For respondents who had been STHs for less than two years and secondary decision makers, the emotions were not as intense. Emotions were limited as for some it was a business decision, while other respondents cited largely rational responses when asked how they felt about the decision.

*I know that when I made the decision not to renew I would be supported by my head office leadership team, again if it came up, we sponsor rugby, I knew that would be in a position where I could obtain tickets from our head office team.
(Nicole, P4, 83:83)*

*I was disappointed in the customers not wanting to go to the rugby games.
(Dean, P8, 131:131)*

I knew I could not get to the games so it was the right decision for me, I knew I could not do it, it was unnecessary money for me to spend and I would not use it. (Sean, P14, 134:134)

5.4.5.2 Team support post dissolution phase

The post dissolution phase is characterised by respondents who watched rugby games on TV and had a relatively low attendance of games at Loftus Versveld Stadium. Almost all the respondents mentioned that they no longer actively attended Blue Bulls games at the stadium. The majority follow the games on TV, some frequently and others relatively infrequently. This finding is prevalent across respondents.

I can't remember really since I haven't been going to games lately so I have not been following so much like I said with my time schedule. (Anna, P1, 76:76)

Re-patronage intention is for the most part positive for respondents. Many of the respondents noted that once their current barriers or constraints to attendance have disappeared, they would consider purchasing a season ticket once again. For others, re-patronage would be based on a number of conditions which Blue Bulls management would need to fulfil prior to them considering renewal of their season tickets.

I am on a sabbatical now, but I still watch it on the TV. I am not saying I will never go back to Loftus but things will have to change, their approach and the way they sell tickets, the season tickets, that needs to change, there are certain things that they have to implement. (Nigel, P7, 88:89)

Yes, in two or three years' time, when I am retiring, I will be a plan again. (Sean, P16, 316:316)

While not cited with the majority, a few respondents offered post rationalisations and provided cognitive reinforcement of their decision not to renew their season ticket. These rationalisations ranged from the costs of time and money saved, together with the fact that the Blue Bulls performance had not been good recently.

5.4.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, the data supports the research proposition that the sports fan dissolution process followed a three part process of dissolution, exit and post-dissolution phases as per the consumer / service provider detachment process. The findings demonstrated that the responses are clearly linked with the conceptual dissolution, exit and post dissolution phases described in Chapter 2. While the respondents cited that they progressed through each of the phases, some of the characteristics of each phase differed from the conceptual model based on literature defined in Chapter 2.

In summary the following findings should be considered:

- The breakdown trigger is an **unexpected event** which results in a **reassessment of the situation** by the respondents.
- The breakdown phase takes place over an **extended period of time** but is temporally different between respondents.
- The breakdown phase is **highly iterative**. The respondents progress through **multiple positive and negative experiences** which either further breakdown the relationship or serve to reinforce it.
- The determinant incident triggers the decision not to renew once the **fan's attachment has broken down** post a number of **negative experiences** to the point where the **costs outweigh the benefits**. The season ticket holder then resorts to a **largely rational process** to make the decision.
- The exit phase is largely a **passive phase**. Either the respondent suspends the season ticket **without notification** or they **decline when** the Blue Bulls office **made contact** to renew the ticket.

- In the post dissolution phase it is relatively clear about whether the respondent progressed through a **weak or strong process** of dissolution. This is **largely governed** by their responses regarding **re-patronage intention**.

5.5 Research Results for Research Proposition 2

5.5.1 Introduction and synopsis of results

The conceptual model defined in Chapter 2 proposed that there are three key criteria which trigger the dissolution process for an allegiant or attached sports fan to become detached from his team. As in the brand dissolution process, these criteria are all related to the “product” or in this case, the Blue Bulls team. The three conditions identified were unmet expectations of the team’s performance, the appearance of attractive sport or team alternatives and changes in team liking criteria. While unmet team performance was cited by respondents as a negative driver experienced during the breakdown phase, it is not a key trigger of the sports fan dissolution process. The other two hypothesised criteria were not mentioned by respondents and are therefore, not deemed to be triggers of the dissolution process.

5.5.2 Main triggers of the dissolution process

With reference to the illustrative quotes in Table 12, the main triggers of the dissolution process cited by respondents can be classified as either internal or external constraints. **Table 14** below summarises the main triggers of the sport fan dissolution process as cited by the 14 respondents.

Table 14 Summary of the key breakdown triggers

Respondent	Category of Response
Anna	Internal Constraint: Lack of someone to attend games with
Nathan	External Constraint: Work commitments
Teunis	External Constraint: Work commitments
Nicole	External Constraint: Cost based on lack of demand
Eugene	Internal Constraint: Lack of someone to attend games with
Brian	Internal Constraint: Lack of someone to attend games with
Nigel	Internal Constraint: Seating issues at stadium
Dean	External Constraint: Cost based on lack of demand
Sarie	External Constraint: Work commitments and personal issues
Nico	Internal Constraint: Smoking in the stadium
Ruaan	Internal Constraint: Lack of success
Elan	External Constraint: Family commitments
Stefan	Internal Constraint: Smoking and drunk spectators in the stadium
Sean	Internal Constraint: Seating issues at stadium

The above summary of response categories demonstrates that there is a balance of internal and external constraints which are cited as the main triggers. External constraints revolved around family and work commitments together with the cost of the ticket based on the lack of demand by clients. When an internal constraint was cited as a trigger, three of the four respondents stated that the reason was due to the lack of someone to attend the game with.

In two of the instances this was due to a social need which was not being fulfilled and in the other instance this was due to the fact that the person who could not attend was paying for the respondent's ticket. The other four internal constraints related to issues with other spectators, such as smoking in the stadium and other spectators taking their seats which spurred on a confrontation. The internal constraint of unmet team performance is cited by only one respondent as the main trigger for the dissolution process.

As mentioned previously, unmet expectations of team performance were mentioned by respondents in the context of the breakdown phase but on closer review there was only

one instance where unmet team performance was mentioned in the context of the breakdown trigger. Interestingly team performance was mentioned predominantly by those respondents who were STHs for longer than two years. This indicates that these respondents had a good understanding of the game and the style of rugby played by the Blue Bulls team.

But again you have to look at all the factors, there is a mass exodus of Bulls players coming out, again as much as I love the Bulls, I am a very staunch supporter, do I want to go and watch a team that loses every week - I don't think so. (Brian, P6, 151:152)

The first thing that we said to each other was that we don't like the style of rugby that the Bulls are playing, especially the so called kick and chase rugby, then once they have the ball it's this kick and drive, kick and drive, they don't use their back line which we thought was perfect, they don't use them that often." (Ruaan, P13, 33:33)

With the coaches now, that is when it changed, the kicking game is not on for me, rugby is more than just kicking the ball. I don't like it at all, not at all. (Stefan, P15, 90:92)

Cost was also frequently mentioned; however, it was limited in its link to the breakdown trigger events. As the breakdown trigger starts a phase of cost / benefit analysis, it is during the breakdown phase and also during the post dissolution phase where the cost of the season ticket is mentioned as a factor in the decision.

The season tickets are renewed annually and in the past they were always renewed but like any other business, especially due to the economic times in our country. It was an extra expense of which I needed to be quite confident that if we had renewed them that we would be able to get our return on the investment made and at that stage, due to budgets being under constraints and us being consistently driving efficiencies and making sure that what we spent was really in line with the budget, that was basically one of the only reasons why I didn't renew at that stage. (Nicole, P4, 56:56)

The mentions of unmet team performance are found to be in relation to the breakdown phase however, changes to team liking criteria and attractive alternatives were not mentioned by respondents as main triggers or drivers of their decision to lapse. **Table 15** below summarises the mentions by proposed trigger:

Table 15 Summary of respondent mentions per hypothesised trigger

Proposed Triggers	Number of mentions
Attractive alternatives	0
Change in team liking criteria	1
Unmet team performance	28

5.5.3 Conclusion

The conceptual model defined in Chapter 2 proposed that the triggers of the sports fan dissolution process are aligned with the brand dissolution process which centres on the product itself. The sports fan was proposed to either have unmet needs in terms of team performance or there was deemed to be a change in the drivers of team liking such as player moves or player performance. The last trigger was associated with switching to an alternate team. Blue Bulls fans are fiercely loyal with a repertoire set of maximum two teams that they support. The Cheetahs are the only other team to feature in their repertoire and respondents cited that they only supported them when the Blue Bulls were not playing.

External and internal constraints were noted as the main triggers of the dissolution process. External constraints that were cited included a range of triggers such as work and family commitments and the cost of the season ticket. Internal constraints included issues with other spectators, a lack of someone to attend with and one mention of unmet team performance. In summary, the trigger events are largely intrapersonal, interpersonal or structural in nature. They have little to do with the Blue Bulls team performance, changes in liking criteria or the appearance of attractive alternatives.

5.6 Research Results for Research Proposition 3

5.6.1 Introduction and synopsis of results

The findings in Chapter 5.4.3 were limited to the characteristics of the breakdown phase, while Proposition 3 focuses on the process of breakdown. Since sports fans are assumed to be attached to the team, the conceptual model as defined in Chapter 2 characterised the breakdown phase as iterative in nature as sports fans deliberate whether they should renew their season ticket or not. Fans also experience many positive and negative experiences during the breakdown phase which ultimately compel them to make a decision. In the exploration of each of the phases in section 5.3, the breakdown phase was revealed to be iterative and cyclical in nature, especially for those respondents who had been STHs for longer than two years.

The discussion that follows demonstrates that the STHs had relatively strong levels of attachment to the Blue Bulls and hence, the breakdown phase for respondents was deemed to be iterative in order to break their bonds with the team.

5.6.2 Attachment strength and bond with the team

Generally, all respondents cited a high level of attachment with the Blue Bulls. **Table 16** indicates the strength of attachment by the number of mentions by respondents.

Table 16: Summary of the strength of attachment and loyalty mentions

Bond with the Blue Bulls	< 2 YEARS	>2 YEARS	TOTAL
Attachment strength	50	48	98
Attitudinal loyalty	16	16	32
Behavioural loyalty	11	8	19
Weak attachment	8	4	12

It does not make a difference, whether I watch there or here, it does not change my mind, they are still my team, if they play good they play good, if they play bad, there is always someone better than you so it makes no difference. (Teunis, P3, 155:155)

They grow onto you and I've seen them struggling you know...for a couple of years and I've seen them doing good over the years, but there was never a time that I thought – no, I don't like them anymore, whether they win 50% of their matches, you are angry and disappointed, but there is just something about the Blue Bulls, even the atmosphere at Loftus is different to other places. (Eugene, P5, 76:76)

The above comments indicated a high level of commitment and attachment to the team and hence, it is expected that the breakdown phase would be repetitive in nature to break the bonds with the team as demonstrated in section 5.4.

5.6.3 Deliberation over a number of factors

A number of respondents stated that they deliberated over time and reviewed a number of factors prior to reaching the decision not to renew tickets. In some cases this was over a period of time, in other cases respondents would consciously take stock of the situation and weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of ticket renewal. The below comments demonstrate the deliberation approach of various respondents.

I think it's a combination of factors, one having more time to travel and go on holidays was keeping me away from the rugby and the cost of the ticket compared to the... or in relation to the number of games I would be able to attend during the year, not through their fault but through my own choices, it made it a bit expensive. (Eugene, P5, 144:144)

That's the other thing, we always would debate whether we would get seasonal tickets but inevitably we knew we would, but it was a case of should we, shouldn't we, then we would weigh up how many games we would go to, are we going to make use of it for the Currie Cup, etc. etc. So it was always...just before cut off for seasonal ticket renewal we would always renew. (Brian, P6, 112:112)

5.6.4 The cycle of iterative experiences

In the majority of instances, respondents acknowledged that there were a number of cumulative experiences which primed them to take the decision not to renew the season ticket. Many of the experiences cited were negative. However, it was clear that this was also peppered with positive experiences. The predominant positive experience mentioned by all the respondents was the atmosphere at Blue Bulls games and particularly at the Loftus Versveld Stadium.

The atmosphere is just amazing, you meet so many friends and you go and watch, we go with a lot of friends, we make a braai before and we go and watch the game, the atmosphere is just amazing, the shirts and the promotions they have there is just awesome. (Nathan, P2, 98:98)

In some instances, especially from those respondents who were long term season STHs, a number of negative experiences were experienced over time, which resulted in a cyclical and repetitive process of deliberation after each event about whether or not to renew the season ticket.

The first thing that we said to each other was that we don't like the style of rugby that the Bulls are playing, especially the so called kick and chase rugby. Then once they have the ball it's this kick and drive, kick and drive. They don't use their back line which we thought was perfect. They don't use them that often. Amazingly this year, when we did not have our season tickets, we noticed a change in the style of play. After last year's season we were sick and tired of this type of play they were playing, it's frustrating as a spectator. (Ruan, P13, 33:33)

No two people will have the same coaching style or the same ideas of how rugby should be played. That is a problem, no one has ever told us why Frans Ludike does not carry on with his coaching and why he suddenly disappears after Super 15. (Ruaan, P13, 37:37)

The other thing was this whole issue of the pink jerseys, last year for the first time they had this going away jersey, when they played overseas against home teams they usually have another jersey, for some reason and I don't know why, they decided on these horrible pink jerseys, they can say what they like but I do think it effected the players, they were the laughing stock, people whistled and it must effect you. (Ruaan, P13, 38:38)

Then also something that bothered us when we used to go. I am 67 years old at the moment, we have moved on in life but we would go there early to avoid the traffic and the people and standing in queues to get to our seats. At least an hour before kickoff we would be sitting in our seats on the pavilion and I always wondered why they can't have a curtain raiser, for instance let's say Menlo Park playing another school, as a curtain raiser, give the people something to look at. (Ruaan, P13, 40:40)

The other thing is that we thought for what we get and in view of what I have just said, it became very expensive. I even wrote an email to Barend van Graan (sp) about 2 or 3 years ago. I said Barend – we are avid Bulls supporters but just compare the cost of a season ticket at Ellis Park to support the Lions and the cost of a season ticket at Loftus to support the Bulls - it was a huge difference. The ticket for the Lions for instance included parking, which the Bulls does not include any parking, you have to find your own parking in the street. There was in fact no response from Barend. (Ruaan, P13, 45:45)

So the last thing that really made us decide to stop going there was in the area where we sat on the main grandstand. Over the years you would see the same people, with the same tickets. We would greet each other and there is a nice atmosphere but what happened – especially the last game, when the Bulls played the Stormers, people who bought tickets for other seats in the stadium came and sat on empty seats where normally ticket holder or season ticket holders would seat, this one game there was a man and his two sons. I felt so sorry for these boys, they are about 8 or 9 years old and he sat there, he was a Stormers supporter, I don't mind – you support the team you like but he was

rude, swearing about the Bulls, it was most unpleasant. I then decided if this is what it is going to be like I am not going to go any more. (Ruaan, P13, 47:48)

The above five quotes emphasise the iterative nature of the process and the number of negative experiences that the respondent endured prior to making the decision not to renew his season ticket. One particular respondent had been a season ticket holder for 15 years, so the process of dissolution and resulting detachment took some time and was highly iterative during the breakdown phase.

5.6.5 Conclusion

The before-mentioned discussion of results demonstrated that the deliberation over positive, neutral and negative factors created an iterative process which led to a decision about whether or not to renew the season tickets. Therefore Proposition 3 can be deemed as valid and true for the process of dissolution. Even though a strong attachment is cited by all STHs regardless of tenure, with reference to Table 18, respondents who had been STHs for longer than two years followed a period of intense and extended deliberation and the process was deemed to be highly iterative or cyclical in nature.

5.7 Research Results for Research Proposition 4

5.7.1 Introduction and synopsis of results

The conceptual model in Chapter 2 was constructed on the premise that the sports fan dissolution process is sequential in nature. Proposition 4 tested in this research study was defined based on this premise. In most instances the dissolution process is characterised as being largely sequential; however, there were instances where the respondents did not follow all the defined stages of the process. Firstly, the sequencing of stages was based on whether the respondent was a primary or secondary decision maker and secondly, some of the stages were simultaneous. In particular, the exit phase was avoided because the Blue Bulls ticket office did not remind the respondent that the ticket was up for renewal, so a passive process followed where the season ticket holder did not renew. As a result, the main finding was that the dissolution process, while largely sequential in nature, can have simultaneous stages in certain instances.

5.7.2 The sequencing of the dissolution process

The results support the premise that lapsed STHs follow a dissolution process that had been proposed to consist of distinct stages of dissolution, exit and post-dissolution.

Table 17 below indicates whether or not each of the 14 respondents specified an experience at that stage of dissolution.

Table 14 Stages of the dissolution process cited by respondents

Respondent	Breakdown Trigger	Breakdown Phase	Determinant Incident / Trigger	Exit Phase	Post Dissolution Phase
Anna	X		X		X
Nathan	X		X		X
Teunis	X	X	X		X
Nicole	X	X	X	X	X
Eugene	X	X	X	X	X
Brian	X	X	X	X	X
Nigel	X	X	X	X	X
Dean	X	X	X	X	X
Sarie	X	X	X	X	X
Nico	X	X	X	X	X
Ruaan	X	X	X	X	X
Elan	X	X	X		X
Stefan	X	X	X		X
Sean	X	X	X	X	X

For the majority of respondents the process is sequential in nature. In order to elaborate on the instances where the process is non-sequential, the responses of three respondents will be discussed further. The first process for discussion is the case of Anna, who did not undergo the breakdown or exit phases of the process. **Table 18** below illustrates the process using illustrative quotes.

Table 15 Non-sequential dissolution process - Anna

Dissolution Process Phases	Illustrative quotes
Breakdown trigger	<i>Ja, that's about the time because everything got redirected. I was on my own, I had to rebuild my life and he's not there to support me financially or otherwise so my social life was going down when he moved. (P1, 128:128)</i>
Breakdown phase	N/A
Determinant incident	<i>I think it was 2011. I can't remember if it was the end or the beginning of the year. I think it was around May when he moved.(P1, 120:120)</i>
Exit phase	N/A
Post dissolution phase	<i>Yes I did. I was trying to see if there was another way where other friends can go because I was missing it. I was missing what I had, the enjoyment, the social. Everything just went dead so yes there was missing it. I was looking at options but there wasn't at that time any friends or relationships that could support me. (P1, 212:212)</i>

In the above case, Anna indicated that a lifestyle change was the breakdown trigger in the process of dissolution. However, it was not until the family member who had paid for the ticket did not renew it, that the determinant incident took effect. Since Anna was not the primary decision maker in the process, there was no indication of a breakdown phase as the family member would have undergone this process. There was also no mention of an exit phase as the family member would have received notification of renewal from the Blue Bulls ticket office. Nathan followed the same process as Anna because he was also a secondary decision maker.

Table 16 Non-sequential dissolution process - Elan

Dissolution Process Phases	Illustrative quotes
Breakdown trigger	<i>I think it was when the boys started playing cricket, I missed at least half of the games, it cost me a lot of money, I can rather spend that money on cricket equipment and extra lessons and stuff, instead of going to half of the games. (P14, 83:83)</i>
Breakdown phase	<i>Unfortunately the cricket determined when I could go to rugby. The matches are not always in Pretoria so we have to travel to play cricket, by the time you get back half the game of rugby is finished or I have missed the full game. (P14, 89:90)</i>
Determinant incident	<i>When they sent me the renewal application, last year, I decided then not to renew it. (P14, 133:133)</i>
Exit phase	N/A
Post dissolution phase	<i>I still support the Blue Bulls even though I am not at the stadium. (P14, 114:114)</i>

The above process illustrates a determinant incident which coincides with the exit phase. The Blue Bulls ticketing office contacted the respondent and it was at this point that the decision not to renew was triggered. Elan followed each of the steps in the dissolution process but the decision trigger or determinant incident coincided with each other. This was also cited as the case for Stefan, where a telephone call from the Blue Bulls to renew, triggered the decision.

In the last instance, Teunis did not cite that he was contacted by the Blue Bulls to renew his season ticket so it lapsed automatically. He did not pass through the exit stage because the Blue Bulls failed to contact him as a reminder to renew. In summary, there are five examples of where respondents did not follow the sequential process of dissolution as defined in Proposition 1.

5.7.3 Conclusion

The before-mentioned discussion of results clearly confirms that in some instances the dissolution process is not sequential in nature. However; this points to specific situations of primary versus secondary decision makers (a sampling issue) and phases being combined. For the majority of respondents the process was sequential and this can be considered as true for lapsed season tickets that undergo the dissolution process. Proposition 4 can be considered to be a feasible suggestion when the findings are considered. However, it should be clarified that stages of the process can be simultaneous.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

6.1 Introduction

In Chapter 5 the research findings were presented in accordance with the research propositions defined in Chapter 3. The findings were derived from a process of conducting and analysing 14 in depth interviews with lapsed Blue Bulls STHs over a period of 8 weeks. This chapter interprets and discusses the research findings in relation to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 and addresses the research problem and gap in the theory outlined in Chapter 1. The intent of this chapter is to ultimately derive insights for sports marketing practitioners and enhance understanding of sports fan detachment and the process of dissolution.

Of the four propositions, three were broadly supported by the data while one of the propositions was not supported. A number of sub-themes emerged more strongly than others. The contextual model derived from literature was largely supported but a number of contradictory and new findings assisted the researcher to further craft the model of the sports fan dissolution process. Each of the propositions are discussed based on the data presented in Chapter 5 and include evidence of where the findings aligned with or diverged from the literature review in Chapter 2. The application of the results and literature in the context of the research problem is explored in this chapter.

6.2 Research Proposition 1

Proposition 1 aimed to determine whether the sports fan dissolution process followed a three part process of dissolution (breakdown trigger, breakdown phase and determinant incident), exit and post-dissolution phases as per the Coulter and Ligas (2000) dissolution process of customer-service provider relationships. A review of four respondent dissolution processes in Chapter Five, specifically in Table 7 to Table 10 clearly demonstrated that the lapsed STHs progressed through each of the three stage process of dissolution, exit and post dissolution. However, the characteristics of each phase were either aligned with or diverged from the conceptual model defined in Chapter 2.

6.2.1 The three stage process of sports fan dissolution

Similar to the Coulter and Ligas (2000) process, the data showed that the dissolution stage for the sports fan detachment process also comprises of three phases of long exit also known as the dissolution stage; the breakdown trigger, breakdown phase and determinant incident. Thereafter, follows the exit and post dissolution stages of dissolution.

In order to discuss the links between the data, the literature and the conceptual model, the literature review commenced by covering the Coulter and Ligas (2000) dissolution process for customer-service provider relationships. This process formed the base for the development of the conceptual model defined in Chapter 2, based on Dagger and Sweeney's (2007) assertion that sports organisations can be likened with service sectors since the delivery of high-quality services promotes customer loyalty in both instances. The following overview frames the points of alignment and discrepancy between the data and the customer-service provider process:

6.2.1.1 *The dissolution stage*

In alignment with Fajer and Schouten (1995) and Tähtinen (2002), the sports fan breakdown process occurs over an extended period of time. Like Coulter and Ligas (2000), there are three phases of long exit; the breakdown trigger, the breakdown phase and the determinant incident.

a) The breakdown trigger

The sports fan dissolution process starts with a clear breakdown trigger which is an **unexpected event** that results in a **reassessment of the situation** and can trigger a cost / benefit process. In the customer-service provider process, the trigger was service-related. In the sports fan context, the trigger is related to external or internal triggers, some of which are related to service issues. These are discussed further in the following section.

b) The breakdown phase

This process continues throughout the breakdown phase which is **highly iterative** as respondent's progress through **multiple positive and negative experiences**. This process is **temporally different** between respondents and continues over an **extended period of time**.

The breakdown phase is defined by Coulter and Ligas (2000) as a period of time post the breakdown trigger in which the customer-service provider relationship

continues. The subject is thought to progress through a number of positive and negative experiences, together with periods of indifference and then undertakes an assessment of the psychological and transactional costs of the dissolution. Fajer and Schouten's (1995) decline stage is also characterised by an affective reduction in loyalty which ultimately leads to the deterioration of the relationship.

As demonstrated in Chapter 5.4.3, the STHs also progressed through multiple positive and negative experiences. The positive experiences cited by respondents were limited to the great atmosphere at the stadium, while negative experiences were frequent and clearly articulated. While an assessment of the psychological costs by respondents may be largely unconscious, the data expressed that the process is iterative and respondents move through a cycle of experiences and reassessment during the breakdown phase.

c) The decision trigger

The breakdown phase continues to the point that the respondents reach a decision trigger rather than a determinant incident / event. At this point in time a number of negative experiences have **broken down the attachment bonds** to the extent where a **rational assessment** of cost / benefit equation no longer makes sense and the costs far outweigh the benefits.

Coulter and Ligas (2000) defined the end of the breakdown phase as being marked by a determinant incident which causes the end of the relationship. These authors stated the incident can either be service, market, self or other related. In this study there were two instances where there was a clear determinant incident which was a service-related issue. However, for the majority of the respondents their decision had been made and a contextual incident gave rise to a final decision not to renew.

Examples of these contextual incidents cited are; conversations related to the renewal of the season ticket, holidays abroad and work commitments which finalise the cost / benefit assessment. The main finding is that the determinant incident is more likely to be a decision trigger as opposed to a specific event.

6.2.1.2 The exit stage

The exit phase is largely a **passive phase**. Either the respondent suspended the season ticket **without notification** or they **actively declined** when the Blue Bulls office **made contact** to renew the ticket.

Dwyer et. al (1987) and Duck (1982) as cited in Fajer and Schouten (1995) described a phase in the dissolution process in which both sides of the relationship agree to end

the relationship. However, in the Coulter and Ligas (2000) study the customer exited in one of three ways – without notification, active confrontation with the service provider and by passively writing a letter to announce his / her departure. However, in their studies on the churn of STHs, Kim and Trail (2010) and McDonald (2010) alluded to the fact that it is likely that the fan does not communicate with the sports organisation prior to leaving.

In line with the assertion by the before-mentioned authors, the data in this study revealed that the exit phase did not require an active termination of the season ticket as per the conceptual model defined in Chapter 2. The respondents were not required to contact the Blue Bulls to cancel, the season ticket simply lapsed. STHs would lapse in one of two ways – without notification and active termination once the Blue Bulls ticket office made contact to renew the ticket. They were not required to take the initiative to contact the Blue Bulls to terminate the ticket.

6.2.1.3 The post dissolution stage

In the post dissolution phase it is relatively clear about whether the respondent progressed through a **weak or strong process** of dissolution. This is **largely governed** by their responses regarding **re-patronage intention** which is an indication about whether the relationship would be consummated again.

Coulter and Ligas (2000) asserted that once the customer has terminated their relationship with the service provider, a number expressed the intention to renew the relationship, while others had strong reactions to the termination and the end of the relationship seemed permanent. In essence, the subjects of the Coulter and Ligas (2000) study either had a weak or relatively strong dissolution process based on their re-patronage intent. In addition, Halinen and Tähtinen (2002) proposed that there is an *Aftermath* stage which refers to the actions that take place to internalise the ending of the relationship and make sense of it. These authors asserted that this is a stage with restorative potential for the relationship.

The data in Chapter 5.4 demonstrated that the post dissolution phase was characterised by emotions such as sadness, guilt and disappointment. Respondents cited positive re-patronage intent which was indicative of a weak process however, this was largely on condition that the current constraints they faced would be relaxed. In some instances re-patronage intent was negative, which indicated a strong dissolution process. Respondents were openly vocal regarding their reasons for terminating the season ticket, which indicates that a process of sense making had taken place to internalise the ending of the relationship.

6.2.2 Conclusion

Duck (1982) as cited in Hocutt (1998) stated that relationship dissolution is a lengthy process which entails emotional, cognitive and affective aspects and cannot be seen as an event. The data from this study supported the premise that the dissolution process of sports fan detachment is in alignment with the before-mentioned assertion. The data further supported the proposition that sports fan dissolution process follows the three phases proposed by Coulter and Ligas' (2000) customer-service provider process, together with the long exit phases of dissolution. However, for the most part, the characteristics of each stage differed and the following conclusions have been reached:

a) Dissolution Stage

- A breakdown trigger exists, however, it is not service or team related. The trigger was due to controllable and uncontrollable factors which are classified as internal or external triggers. This is discussed in the next discussion.
- The breakdown phase is seen to be iterative in nature. A negative experience triggered a cyclical process of reassessment and / or a cost / benefit analysis. If the benefits outweighed the costs, the season ticket holder continued with the relationship but the bond with the team started weakening. A positive experience such as an important game may serve to strengthen the bond again. However, multiple negative experiences result in the season ticket holder's bond deteriorating to a point where costs outweigh the benefits.

Behavioural loyalty starts to wane during this period and could be indicative of a sports fan that progresses through a dissolution process. Even though attitudinal loyalty can be cited as being strong, the subject's behaviour suggested that an evaluative process is being followed in which the respondent was internalising the features of the situation. Identification of this behaviour is crucial for sports team administrators. Active monitoring of a season ticket holder's progression through the dissolution process should be encouraged to put in place tactics to limit further progression. This is covered in greater detail in Chapter 7.

- The determinant incident exists; however, it is not always an event *per se*. In some cases the determinant incident was merely a decision taken after a

period of deliberation instead of an incident which triggered the decision. The main finding for the sports fan dissolution process is that the determinant incident is more likely to be a decision trigger as opposed to a specific event or incident. The determinant incident is also characterised as a critical part of the dissolution process as it triggers the final cost / benefit analysis process prior to the decision not to renew the season ticket. The respondents progressed to a point where the affective bonds with the team were weakened and the costs of the season ticket outweighed the benefits.

b) Exit Stage

- The exit phase is not one of active termination in the case of the sports fan dissolution process. STHs can lapse in one of two ways – without notification and active termination once the team had made contact. This phase is characterised by inaction on the STH's part and this has implications for the team's management as they need to turn this into an active phase in order to retain STHs.

c) Post dissolution stage:

- The post dissolution phase is the point in which it is possible to ascertain which subjects passed through a weak versus strong dissolution process based on their positive or negative comments with respect to re-patronage intention. It is at this stage that restorative actions can come into play by the sports team administrators.

6.3 Research Proposition 2

Proposition 2 aimed to establish the nature of the breakdown trigger of the dissolution process for an allegiant or attached sports fan. This was based on the premise that Proposition 1 was found to be true and that there is in fact a trigger of the process. This was purported by Coulter and Ligas (2000) and further supported by Kim and Trail (2010) and McDonald (2010) in their studies on drivers of churn and constraints to game attendance within a spectator sports context. The previous discussion and findings in Chapter 5 provided evidence that a breakdown trigger is seen to exist in the sports fan dissolution process.

A critical review of literature concerning the relationship dissolution processes by Canti and Mai (2008), Fajer and Schouten (1995), Coulter and Ligas (2000) and Perrin-Martineng (2004) led to the proposition that the trigger was related to the sports team

or 'sports product' as it was possible to draw a parallel with a product in the brand / person dissolution process. The triggers cited in the Perrin-Martinenq (2004) study were then adjusted to align to a sporting context. The triggers were defined as unmet expectations of team performance, the appearance of attractive sport or team alternatives and changes in team liking criteria.

6.3.1 A review of the proposed triggers of the sports fan dissolution process

Table 14 in Chapter 5 categorised each of the triggers of the dissolution process. The unmet expectations of team performance were mentioned consistently by respondents in the context of the breakdown phase but there was **only one instance** where **unmet team performance** was mentioned in the context of the breakdown trigger.

The other two proposed triggers in Proposition 2 were the appearance of attractive sport or team alternatives and changes in team liking criteria. These **two triggers were not mentioned** by respondents. The STHs displayed **high levels of loyalty** to the Blue Bulls and in some cases would mention that their 'B team' was the Cheetahs. However, they would make it very clear that they would only support the Cheetahs when the Bulls were not playing. Attitudinal loyalty is very high for the Blue Bulls and there was **no mention** of attractive alternative teams which would **trigger a switch in loyalty**. While there were a few mentions of the change of the coach in a negative light, this was **not voiced as a change in team liking criteria**.

Even though the 2012 BMI report on the performance of the Vodacom Rugby Teams showed that Blue Bulls fan base declining at 10.9% Year On Year ("2012 Vodacom Rugby Teams", 2012), it is clear that behavioural loyalty is waning during the breakdown phase and post dissolution stage due to **interpersonal, intrapersonal and structural triggers** of the dissolution process but **not due to attractive alternatives or changes in team liking criteria**.

The nature of the breakdown trigger proposed in the conceptual model in Chapter 2 was based on a critical review of the literature on relationship dissolution triggers. The resulting proposition was that the triggers of the sports fan dissolution process are team-related. Perrin Martinenq (2004) cited three triggers of the dissolution process; (1) factors inherent to the brand, (2) changes in the individual and (3) factors inherent to the situation. Once these factors were contrasted with the triggers asserted by Fajer and Schouten (1995); (1) brand switching, (2) brand spurning and (3) brand alienation, commonalities were found and included in the proposition.

The proposal was that the sports fan dissolution process would be triggered by unmet team performance which draws a parallel to deterioration in product performance. This was a factor inherent to the brand cited as a trigger by Perrin-Martinenq (2004) and a driver of brand spurning (Fajer & Schouten, 1995). The findings in Chapter 5.5 revealed that the data is in alignment with Oilver (1999) and Bristow and Sebastian's (2000) assertions that loyal fans can resist the urge to change their allegiance to a team during a losing season or when their favourite player is not on form. This is despite Kim and Trail's (2010) evidence that "Lack of Team Success" is a significant predictor of sports consumption behaviour.

Both Perrin-Martinenq (2004) and Fajer and Schouten (1995) cited changes in the individual as a trigger for the detachment process. Perrin-Martinenq (2004) stated that changes to the needs, values and preferences of the individual may trigger the process. A change in preference would allude to the appearance of attractive alternatives and in Fajer and Schouten's (1995) study, this change in preference triggers brand switching. The findings in Chapter 5.5 demonstrated that respondents are very loyal to the Blue Bulls and cite the Cheetahs as their 'B team' but this is not indicative of a change in preference. They only support the Cheetahs when the Blue Bulls are not playing.

Since the strength of the respondents' loyalty was cited to be particularly high, despite the fact that they did not renew their season ticket, the appearance of attractive alternatives was not seen to be a main trigger of the sports fan dissolution process. There was also no mention of a change to the respondents' liking criteria. This is in alignment with Hardy et al. (2007) who asserted that churn or switching teams is unlikely due to the fact that as loyalty increases, the fan is less likely to switch to another team. The authors also asserted that as identification with the team increases, the importance of maintaining the connection is important.

According to Funk and James (2001), attitudinal loyalty is built over time as the psychological connection to the team strengthens, so it is unlikely that a change in an individual would trigger the process of dissolution unless needs, values or preference had changed over a long period of time to erode attitudinal loyalty. It is more likely that a situation changes which evokes an iterative process of introspection that erodes attitudinal loyalty accordingly. The third factor, cited by Perrin-Martinenq (2004), were factors that are inherent to the situation. However, this trigger was not accounted for in Proposition 2 as the defined triggers revolved around the product or team in this instance, as per the brand / consumer detachment process.

6.3.2 The nature of the triggers of sports fan detachment

However, in all other instances the issues were **controllable and uncontrollable factors** which were related to **internal or external constraints or triggers**. A number of **service-related, controllable triggers** were cited which relate to the stadium and the management thereof. All other instances were **situational and uncontrollable**. These ranged from work and family commitments, to a lack of someone to attend the games with and the cost of the ticket versus the demand for seats at a game.

The results in Chapter 5.5 clearly demonstrated that the trigger of the sports fan dissolution process was largely related to factors that are inherent to the situation and are contextual in nature. Funk and James (2001) noted that subjects can choose to decrease the importance of a relationship by moving to a lower level on the PCM due to factors such as work, family obligations and vacations. By reviewing the results, it appeared that the triggers could be categorised into either external or internal constraints as per the findings by Kim and Trail (2010) and McDonald (2010).

Kim and Trail (2010, p. 191) defined a constraint as “factors which impede or inhibit an individual from attending a sporting event”. These authors defined internal constraints as those related to intrapersonal and interpersonal issues and external constraints as being structural in nature such as cost, weather and lack of transportation. McDonald (2010) stated that both controllable and uncontrollable factors determine game attendance. Uncontrollable factors include family and work commitments and geographical relocation, while controllable factors include complaint handling, ticketing and club administration.

The results in Chapter 5.5 demonstrated that the external constraints that were cited included a range of triggers such as work and family commitments and the cost of the season ticket. Internal constraints included issues with other spectators, lack of someone to attend the games with and there was one mention of unmet team performance.

6.3.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, the data suggested that Proposition 2 as cited in Chapter 3 does not hold true and that the triggers of the sports fan detachment process are not linked to the team’s performance, the presence of attractive alternatives to the team or changes to an individual’s liking criteria with respect to the team. The triggers of sports fan dissolution are seen to be intrapersonal, interpersonal and structural in nature. These triggers are classified as either internal triggers or external triggers. Given that many of

the triggers are uncontrollable in nature, it is a challenge for sports administrators to manage these triggers. However, the controllable triggers, such as seating issues and smoking in the stadium should be monitored and addressed by team administrators. These issues are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 7.

6.4 Research Proposition 3

Proposition 3 aimed to demonstrate that the breakdown phase of the sports fan detachment process is iterative in nature to break the bonds with the sports object. This was based on the premise that Proposition 1 was found to be true and that lapsed STHs undergo a breakdown process which entails a host of positive and negative experiences. The previous discussion in Chapter 6.2 and the findings in Chapter 5.6 support this proposal.

The fact that the breakdown phase is thought to be iterative was based on the assertion by Funk and James (2006) that sports fans' allegiances are strengthened by multiple iterations of the attachment process. Similarly, affective detachment commences at the early stages of the dissolution process and this could also be seen as iterative. Duck (1982) as cited by Fajer and Schouten (1995) stated that the decline phase is one in which the affective bonds in the relationship start to breakdown, leading to an eventual dissolution of the relationship. Coulter and Ligas (2000) confirmed this assertion by stating that the breakdown phase happens over time and is the result of a number of positive and negative experiences.

6.4.1 The characteristics of the breakdown phase in the dissolution process

Findings from the data in Chapter 5.6 supports the notion that the breakdown phase is iterative in nature. A number of **positive and negative experiences trigger** periods of **deliberation** and creates an **iterative process** which leads to a decision about whether or not to renew. Even though a strong attachment was cited by all season STHs regardless of tenure, with reference to Table 18 in Chapter 5, respondents who had been STHs for longer than two years followed a **period of intense** and **extended deliberation**. Therefore, the process is deemed to be highly iterative in nature.

McDonald (2010) asserted that instead of switching, fans typically move backwards and forwards from being an infrequent ticket buyer to a season ticket holder as their situation changed and as they had the means to do so. Funk and James (2006) also supported the notion that the process of attachment is iterative. The data in Chapter

5.6 supported the proposal that in order to break down attachment, the season ticket holder progresses through an iterative process as a result of a number of positive and negative experiences.

The cumulative result of the various cycles weaken and break down the fan's attachment by decreasing the importance of the relationship with the team to a point where the determinant incident / decision trigger determined their decision not to renew their season ticket. In contrast to Fajer and Schouten's (1995) assertion that affective loyalty declines during the sports fan breakdown phase, data supports that behavioural loyalty declined as respondents cited their decreased attendance of games. Funk et al. (2000) confirmed that the frequency of games attended or watched at home on television is related to the level of psychological commitment to a team. The data suggested that while lapsed STHs stated that their behavioural loyalty was waning, attitudinal loyalty was cited to be relatively strong during this phase although their changes in behaviour suggested differently.

In addition, there were some differences detected between those respondents who had been STHs for longer than two years. The fact that more negative experiences were cited by these respondents gives rise to two possible explanations; that tenure plays a role in that there was a longer period for these individuals to have negative experiences, or that it takes many cumulative negative experiences for these respondents to decide to lapse due to their attachment to the team. The latter explanation is more likely since McDonald (2010) stated that STHs for a long period display a higher degree of involvement and highly value the connection they form with the team.

Funk and James' (2001) PCM framework allows the assumption that the fans with a longer tenure have a stronger psychological connection and they are classified as allegiant or attached fans, while their shorter term counterparts are classified as attracted to the team, therefore the temporal difference is justified. The allegiant fan's psychological bond with the team is far more enduring and would take an extended time to breakdown.

6.4.2 Conclusion

In conclusion, the data suggested that Proposition 3 as defined in Chapter 3 holds true and that the break down phase in the process of sports fan detachment is iterative in nature. As a result of many negative and positive experiences, an iterative process of deliberation and reassessment takes place to the point where costs outweigh the benefits of the relationship. The decision trigger then results in the season ticket holder

terminating the season ticket. According to McDonald (2010), in practice STHs are treated as if they are highly involved with the team, despite the tenure of the relationship. The data exposed that there are variations in the nature of the breakdown phase depending on the length for which the season ticket has been held. Team administrators need to ensure that they track the satisfaction levels of STHs to understand the positive and negative experiences to which they are subject. Since the breakdown phase is an iterative cycle, the process could be managed with knowledge. This is discussed comprehensively in Chapter 7.

6.5 Research Proposition 4

Proposition 4 aimed to establish whether the dissolution process of sports fan detachment is sequential. Funk and James (2001) stated that while the process of strengthening a subject's psychological connection does not always work within extremes of the continuum, the process is still deemed to be sequential in nature. Halinen and Tähtinen (2002) and Tähtinen (2004) stated that the conclusion of business relationships has stages that can be experienced simultaneously, while certain stages can be skipped altogether. However, the majority of literature reviewed in Chapter 2 on engagement and detachment processes confirmed that the processes were sequential in nature.

6.5.1 The sequencing of the sports fan dissolution process

The conceptual model defined in Chapter 2, defined the process of dissolution as being sequential in nature. The findings in Chapter 5.7 revealed that **in some instances** the process of dissolution is **sequential** but also that certain stages can **occur simultaneously**. Initially it was assumed that stages in the process could be skipped but there were two instances where the respondents' decisions to terminate their season ticket were triggered when the Blue Bulls made contact to remind them to renew. Technically, this would be classified as the exit phase of the process but given that the "contact event" was cited as the determinant incident, one can conclude that by definition, the **processes can run simultaneously**.

For **the majority** of the respondents, however, the **process was sequential** i.e. the followed a linear progression from the breakdown trigger to the post dissolution stage. However, where the respondents **were not the primary decision maker**, the decision to terminate the season ticket was not their own and the **process was non-sequential**. While the breakdown trigger is cited, the respondents made **no mention** of

a breakdown phase which is an iterative process of cost / benefit analysis. As they did not make the investment in the ticket, the **process of review and reappraisal was not seen** to take place. The inclusion of two secondary decision makers was a sample error and the insights cannot be generalised to theory.

Funk and James (2001) noted that the vertical continuum is not limited to an upwards movement, nor do people necessarily move from one end of the continuum to another. These authors also mentioned that it is possible for a person to move down the vertical continuum which leads to the question about whether a downward process of dissolution is in fact sequential in nature in contrast to the attachment process. The findings in Chapter 5.7 demonstrated that the process of dissolution is largely sequential in nature. However, in the context of the two secondary decision-makers, if the investment is not the responsibility of the season ticket holder, the data shows that the breakdown phase does not occur. The financial outlay for the ticket is what spurs on the process of reassessment and cost / benefit analysis.

As mentioned, Halinen and Tähtinen (2002) and Tähtinen (2004) stated that certain stages of the process of concluding a business relationship may be skipped and the order of the stages can vary. These authors continued to assert that various stages can happen simultaneously because different actors are involved in performing the actions. They used the example of individuals in a buyer business considering whether to end of the relationship or not, while the seller company performs actions to restore it. One can conclude that the secondary decision maker does not undergo the breakdown phase because the primary decision maker progresses through the stage on their behalf. Different actors are involved at different stages when there is a person who fulfils the role of purchaser of the ticket and another person who attends games using a ticket that has been purchased for them.

In the instance of the simultaneous nature of the decision trigger and the exit phase, while different actors are not involved, this situation demonstrates that the stages are not mutually exclusive; however, they are still sequential. In the event of a phone call or e-mail, the decision process can be triggered and the relationship is terminated immediately. It merely happens to be classified as part of the exit phase because the conversation is direct and termination is communicated to the Blue Bulls ticket office. The breakdown phase had broken the bond to a point where the respondent would have withdrawn without notice but the contact event triggers an immediate decision.

6.5.2 Conclusion

In conclusion, the data suggests that Proposition 4 as cited in Chapter 3 holds true and that in the majority of cases the sports fan dissolution process is sequential in nature while the decision trigger and exit phase can be simultaneous. It is advised that sports administrators profile their STHs to establish whether they are in a particular phase of the dissolution process. Since the process is largely sequential in nature, the administrators can understand which CRM and marketing communication tactics to employ at each stage as they can predict how the fan will progress through stages. A fundamental aspect to be vigilant of is the exit phase because the contact event—such as an e-mail or phone call—is in fact the decision trigger to not renew the season ticket. These aspects are discussed comprehensively in Chapter 7.

While the findings cannot be generalised, it is also important to understand whether STHs are the primary decision maker with respect to the purchase of the ticket. Once this is established, marketing efforts must be directed at the decision maker as they are responsible for the purchase of multiple tickets. If they lapse, this does not mean the loss of sale of one ticket but could mean multiple lost sales and a significant loss of income.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

7.1 Introduction

The previous chapter discussed the main research findings in the context of the literature defined in Chapter 2. This chapter provides a summary of the project and the conclusion to the research conducted. The following discussion reviews the main findings in the context of the research problem, which was presented in Chapter 1. The conceptual model presented in Chapter 2 is revisited to elucidate the findings presented in Chapter 6.

The significant insights informed a refined view of the sports fan dissolution process model and the implications thereof are discussed in the context of theory and practice. The manner in which the model was constructed is elaborated upon, together with the application of the model and its contribution to existing theory. The managerial implications of the model are presented in the context of three strategic stakeholder groups namely; sports team administrators, sponsors and broadcasters.

Finally, recommendations for future research are discussed that are specifically related to strengthening the body of knowledge on the process of sports fan detachment and the process of dissolution.

7.2 Aims of the research

As established in Chapter 1, the idea of retaining loyal fans and developing the fan base is considered to be critical for the success of the sports franchise or team. A decline in the loyalty of fans impacts on the profitability of the franchise due to declines in behavioural loyalty which results in declining ticket sales and merchandise revenue (Dhurup, 2010; Funk et al., 2000; Kim & Trail, 2010; McDonald, 2010), along with the number of eyeballs glued to the television which, in turn, drives a decline in ratings for broadcasters (Funk & Neale, 2006). If there are fewer fans in the stadium or watching on TV, sponsors are less likely to support the team and are more likely to place their sponsorship investment elsewhere. Inasmuch, advertisers then investigate alternate programming to place their advertising spend.

This study sought to explore the concept of fan loyalty in a sports marketing context. The initial exploration phase defined potential areas for further study. It also revealed that literature on fan loyalty has focused predominantly on the drivers of loyalty (Heere

& Dickson, 2008; Funk & James, 2006; Funk & Neale, 2006) and the motivational aspects of fan behaviour (Funk et al., 2002; Kim & Trail, 2010) together with the process of converting a sports fan from awareness to allegiance (Darcy et al., 2012; Funk & James, 2001; Funk & James, 2004).

Funk and James (2001) stated that, in the context of the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM), little work had been done to understand how sports fans detach themselves from their team and become less attached or allegiant. A closer review of literature revealed that the idea of the dissolution of the sports fan / sports team relationship had clearly been neglected in favour of studying the development of the relationship. The research problem was based on addressing this gap in theory by examining the concept of sports fan detachment and the dissolution process. This was achieved through a qualitative exploratory research study that engaged detached sports fans who were classified as such due to their nature of being lapsed STHs, specifically from the Blue Bulls rugby franchise.

7.3 Summary of the research and main findings

Fourteen in-depth interviews were conducted with lapsed STHs of the Blue Bulls rugby franchise in order to test the propositions defined in Chapter 3. These propositions were constructed to further understand the process of sports fan detachment and the dissolution process which STHs progress through from the trigger of the process to the phase post the termination of their season ticket.

The research findings were largely consistent with the explanation from Coulter and Ligas (2000) that explained the dissolution process of customer-service provider relationships on which the conceptual model defined in Chapter 2 was based. However, the current research contributed to existing literature by defining a model of the sports fan dissolution process and refined the conceptual model based on the discrepancies noted in Chapter 6 between the findings of this study and the Coulter and Ligas (2000) customer-service provider dissolution process. The main findings are discussed below to elaborate on the sports fan dissolution process.

7.3.1 Understanding the three stage dissolution process

The data from this study supports the proposition that the sports fan dissolution process follows the three phases proposed by Coulter and Ligas' (2000) customer-service provider process, together with the long exit phases of dissolution. Initially the process is triggered by an interpersonal, intrapersonal or structural event or constraint

which sparks the breakdown process. The breakdown process is cyclical or iterative in nature and is characterised by a number of positive or negative events which either reinforce the sports fan-sports team relationship, or break it down. The phase to break down the bond between the fan and the sports object takes place over time.

Eventually an event leads to the decision trigger and results in a cost / benefit evaluation by the sports fan. At this point the cycle of negative experiences or constraints leads to a point where the costs outweigh the benefits of the season ticket and active support of the team. The exit phase is characterised by a passive termination of the season ticket or the active termination in the event of a follow up contact by the sports team ticket administrators. The re-patronage intention in the post dissolution phase is indicative of the strength of the dissolution process. In the majority of cases, the sports fan is open to re-establishing a season ticket, but this would be determined by the lifting or reduction of the constraints faced by the fan.

The three stage dissolution process provides insight regarding how a sports fan detaches from the sports object. This process has significant managerial implications for team administrators, sponsors and broadcasters since an understanding of each phase of the process provides opportunities to profile fans to intervene in each stage of the process.

7.3.2 The characteristics of the breakdown trigger and ability to prevent the breakdown spiral

Proposition 2 aimed to test whether the triggers of the sports fan dissolution process were related to the team's performance, presence of alternative teams or a change in the liking criteria of the fan with respect to the team. The triggers of sports fan dissolution are seen to be intrapersonal, interpersonal or structural in nature and were not necessarily related to the sports team itself.

These triggers can be classified as either internal triggers (intrapersonal and interpersonal) or external (structural) triggers. Many of the triggers cited in this study were uncontrollable in nature because they were based on individual circumstances. However, controllable triggers which are structural in nature can be managed by team administrators. The breakdown trigger is the first of multiple positive and negative experiences that the sports fan undergoes.

7.3.3 The characteristics of the breakdown phase and the sequential nature of the dissolution process

Proposition 3 tested the characteristics of the sports fan's progression through the breakdown phase, which is post the breakdown trigger event or constraint and prior to the decision trigger. In agreement with Coulter and Ligas (2000) this process takes place over time and was seen to be cyclical or iterative in nature. In line with literature on creating consumer / customer bonds with a brand, service or sports object, the process to break the bonds is seen to be iterative in nature. This presents a window of opportunity for sports administrators to intervene in the breakdown phase by delivering reinforcing experiences where the negative experiences cannot be addressed.

Proposition 4 aimed to test whether a sports fan progresses through each of the three stages of dissolution in a linear or sequential manner. The process of sports fan dissolution was seen to be largely sequential in nature with some instances noted of progress through simultaneous stages and decision-maker dynamics. Effectively this means that once the breakdown trigger occurs, the respondents progressed through a phase of breakdown. The next step is the decision trigger that results in the exit phase. All respondents then progressed into the post dissolution stage.

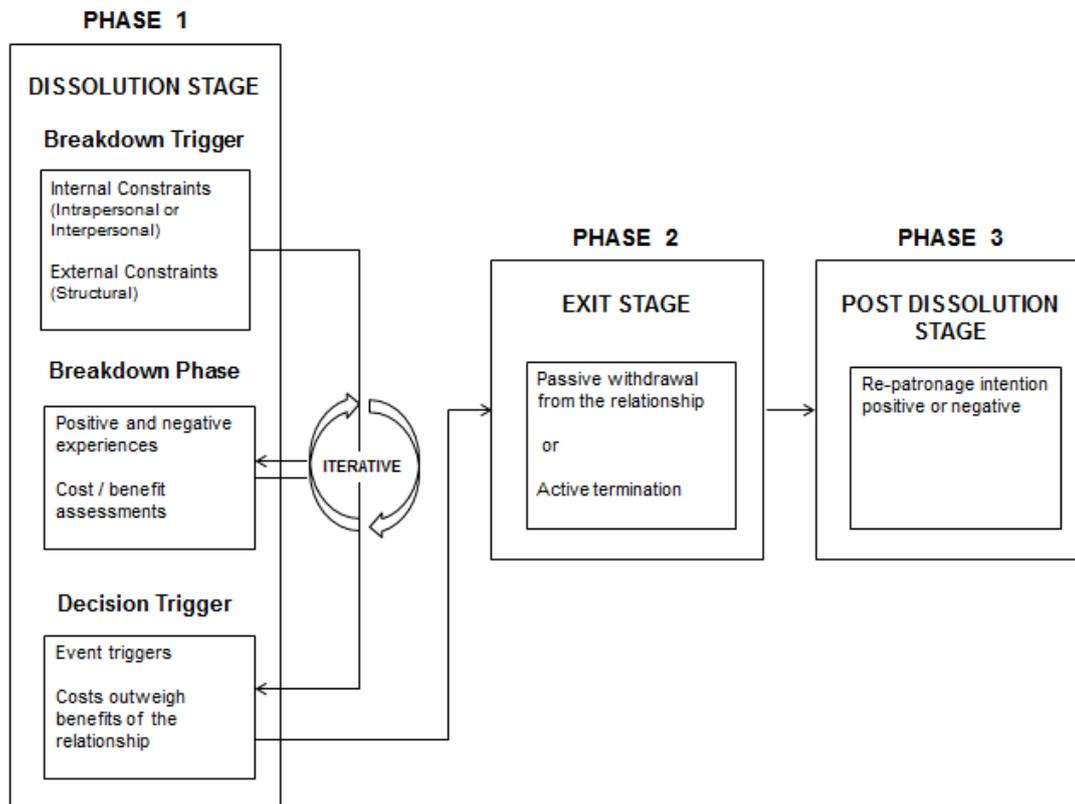
The sequencing and the simultaneous nature of some of the phases are important to understand, since it provides sports administrators with guidance to project intervention tactics at each stage of the process. For example, if the sports fan's breakdown could be triggered directly into a decision state, then the team administrators would not have the benefit of an extended breakdown phase to intervene in the process of breakdown. Given the potential simultaneous nature of the decision incident and the exit phase, sports administrators should be aware that contact with the season ticket holder can trigger termination of the relationship.

7.4 Model to illustrate the key findings from the research

Based on the conceptual model constructed in Chapter 2, a model to illustrate and summarise the findings of this research is presented in **Figure 3**. This model has been developed with the aim to provide sport team administrators, sponsors and broadcasters, a customer relationship management (CRM) profiling mechanism to identify the level of detachment a sports fan may be experiencing once the process of dissolution is triggered. CRM tactics can be employed at each level to strengthen the

bond between the fan and sports object and potentially reverse or stall the process of relationship dissolution.

Figure 3 Model illustrating the sports fan dissolution process of detachment



Refinements to the conceptual model in **Figure 1** are deduced from the research findings in Chapter 6. The data showed that the process of dissolution follows a three part process including the dissolution stage, the exit phase and the post dissolution phase which is noted in the model as phase 1-3. The dissolution stage is further broken down into the breakdown trigger which starts the process, the breakdown phase and the decision trigger. This is consistent with the conceptual model in Chapter 2.

The characteristics of each phase of the dissolution process are either reinforced or divergent from the initial proposal. The breakdown trigger is characterised by internal or external constraints as opposed to being triggered by unmet team performance, attractive alternatives and a change in liking criteria as proposed in the conceptual model in **Figure 1** and Proposition 2. The breakdown phase takes place over time and is characterised by a variety of positive and negative experiences as originally proposed. The process is cyclical and iterative in nature, as denoted in **Figure 1** and results in many cost benefit assessments over time.

Should the cycle of positive and negative experiences result in the costs of the relationships outweighing the benefits, then an event can trigger the decision not to continue with the season ticket relationship. While the decision trigger can be an event, it is not necessarily a negative incident and hence, the terms have been changed from determinant incident to decision trigger, as displayed in **Figure 1**. The exit stage either follows or coincides with the decision trigger and is characterised by both passive withdrawal and active termination. This is in contrast with the assumption that the season ticket holder needs to actively withdraw from the subscription. Active termination is a result of the ticket office contacting the season ticket holder for confirmation of renewal.

The post dissolution stage coincides with the conceptual model in **Figure 1** and is characterised by either positive or negative re-patronage intent that indicates the relative strength of the process of dissolution. By drawing a parallel with the process of dissolution in a services context, in particular the Coulter and Ligas (2000) relationship dissolution process, the illustrative model defined in **Figure 3** contributes to theory on sports fan detachment and the dissolution process which fans experience by addressing an existing gap in literature.

7.5 Theoretical contribution of the research findings

As per the discussion on the theoretical contribution of this research in Chapter 1, this study builds on a number of theories and models. The Funk and James (2001) PCM study focused on the drivers that move a sports fan through each of the stages towards allegiant loyalty. The authors went on to study the mediating role of attachment factors in developing an allegiant fan, although they stated that no further research had been conducted at that stage on the determinant factors or process that moves a sports fan down the PCM continuum (Funk and James, 2006). This research contributes to this theory by presenting a conceptual paradigm for investigating the process of sports fan dissolution and a movement down the PCM continuum.

A number of studies have focused on factors influencing defection or churn rates amongst lapsed STHs. The findings of this research build on McDonald's (2010) research by providing a framework on which to develop the marketing tactics aligned with the tenure of the season ticket holder. In addition, the McDonald and Stavros (2007) and Kim and Trial (2010) studies focussed on the drivers of defection or churn, however, they do not consider the process which a sports fan progresses through to the point that the decision to lapse is made.

Research to date has focussed predominantly on the factors that drive fan loyalty (Dickson & Heere, 2008; Funk & James, 2006; Funk & Neale, 2006;) and the motivational aspects of sport consumers (Funk et al., 2002; Kim & Trail, 2010) with little focus on the drivers and process of relationship dissolution with a team. It is equally important to understand fan behaviour that works in the opposite direction—the process of dissolution and detachment of sports fans. This research contributes to theory on sports fan detachment and the dissolution process that fans experience.

7.6 The managerial implications of the research findings

Based on the primary data collected and evaluated in Chapter 2 and in light of the model presented in **Figure 3**, there are implications proposed for sports stakeholders who generate revenue based on the behaviours of loyal fans. These behaviours include purchasing tickets, subscribing to season tickets, purchasing merchandise and watching their team on Television. A discussion of the implications for three strategic stakeholder groups follows.

7.6.1 Administrators of sports teams and franchises

Sports administrators are responsible for the operations and marketing of a sports team. These stakeholders are responsible for delivering revenue from which the team derives profit. The proposed model of sports fan dissolution is particularly useful for these stakeholders for the following reasons:

7.6.1.1 Relationship marketing based on profiling

As alluded to previously, the sports fan dissolution process provides a framework upon which sports administrators can profile their existing base of STHs. Research may be used to understand whether a sports fan's dissolution process has been triggered by interpersonal, intrapersonal or structural constraints, how many positive or negative experiences they can cite, the current ratio of costs vs. benefits of the relationship in the mind of the fan and the overall level of satisfaction.

As per Halinen and Tähtinen (2002), there are many restorative actions that sports administrators can put in place in the post dissolution stage. Based on profiling, team administrators should continue to communicate with lapsed STHs whose dissolution process was relatively weak. Ticket packages can be tailored to deliver flexibility for STHs who are facing intrapersonal and interpersonal constraints. Those STHs, who

lapse due to structural constraints, can be profiled and marketing communication should be tailored to address these issues.

In the context of STHs, by understanding the stage at which each individual sits, the sports administrator can develop tactics to address or reverse the process of dissolution. This provides an opportunity for the administrator to protect the revenue delivered by each of the STHs.

7.6.1.2 A tailored approach based on tenure of the relationship

As per McDonald (2010), there are very few sports organisations who distinguish between long term and short term STHs. Communication is rarely tailored and season ticket packages are not structured to meet the needs of the fan. The authors state that many sports organisations assume that the simple move from a transactional buyer to a season ticket holder represents long-term loyalty.

This study demonstrates that STHs with subscription tenure of longer than two years have a longer breakdown phase. The bond with the team is stronger for long term STHs in contrast with short term subscribers. By segmenting STHs by tenure and profiling them accordingly, this presents an opportunity for sports administrators to deliver a tailored intervention during the breakdown phase of the dissolution process. By delivering a number of positive experiences through marketing communication and customer engagement programmes, this may serve to strengthen both the loyalty and the bonds the fan has with the team.

7.6.2 Sponsors of sports teams and franchises

Sponsors of sports franchises invest large sums of money in constructing associations with popular teams via sponsorship activities. This investment is treated and built as an asset by those businesses that fully leverage their sponsorship properties over time. As with any investment, it is important that sponsors understand their return on investment and any potential threats to their investment.

As per the recommendation for sports administrators, sponsors should profile the STHs of the teams they sponsor to understand their likelihood of terminating the subscription. The sponsor can also fully leverage the research data to compel sports administrators to execute CRM strategies and retention tactics to protect their fan base. Declining fan bases are indicative of inefficient sponsorship funds. The sponsors and team administrators need to work together to secure the loyalty of the team's fan base.

7.6.3 Broadcasters of sports teams and sports events

Broadcasters are primarily interested in the viewership or listenership of sports events since the higher the audience, the greater the advertising revenue that can be generated based on the level of audience ratings the match commands. Broadcasters should also compel sports administrators to share their fan profiling with them, so they can use the level of sports fan dissolution as a lead indicator of the overall level of fan loyalty. Should the majority of the team's fan base be declining, the broadcaster can partner with the team administrator to deliver marketing communications to strengthen loyalty and deliver positive experiences. This is a revenue opportunity for the broadcaster despite the declining fan base.

7.7 Recommendations for further research

The focus of this study was to address a gap in literature using a qualitative approach to build theory instead of testing theory. The purpose of this study was to explore the nature of the sports fan dissolution process and the characteristics of each stage. Due to the limited sample size, the research cannot be generalised to the population and it is recommended that a quantitative study confirms and validates the proposed process deduced from this research.

The sample was limited to lapsed STHs of the Blue Bulls. This can be expanded to encompass different rugby teams and / or sporting codes to understand whether the dissolution process proposed is followed in different contexts. Sports and teams command differing levels of loyalty and this could impact on the sports fan dissolution process.

Further research could expand the body of existing literature by understanding how the dissolution process is determined for different strengths of sports fan-sports team relationships. For example, by using the PCM framework it can be determined whether an allegiant fan follows a different process of dissolution vs. an attached or attracted fan. This recommendation is based on the differences detected between those STHs who had subscribed for longer than two years versus those who had held their tickets for less than two years.

This study was largely based on behavioural observations and the affective changes which take place during the process need to be understood further. Future research could be conducted to understand the affective states of the sports fan during the process. Based on these results the efficacy of tactics in alignment with the affective

state of the sports fan can be tested to understand the relative impacts on the reversal process of sports fan detachment.

7.8 Conclusion

As established, the retention and loyalty of sports fans are critical to the survival of sports teams and franchises. A business imperative for sports administrators is to ensure that they recruit new fans but what is vital, is the retention of existing fans. While fans' allegiances to a team may not waver over time, their behaviour can change as they become more detached from their sports team. These behaviours have implications for sports administrators as they can lead to a reduction in revenue for the team. Game attendance and support is an important source of income as it impacts the revenue of sports teams via transactional and season ticket sales, sponsor's return on investment and the audience rating for broadcasters.

Declining fan bases are evident across sporting codes and therefore, further research should be conducted to improve existing understanding of sports fan detachment and the dissolution process through which sports fans progress to the point of not actively supporting their team. Once these vital processes and determiners are explained, sports administrators can develop marketing communication programmes to address churn and detachment behaviours. Interestingly, while the Blue Bulls have a number of marketing strategies in place for their STHs, a fully-fledged CRM programme based on fan profiling can be leveraged to change behaviour.

The sports fan dissolution process can provide a robust framework to profile fans and on which, sports organisations can base their marketing strategies for the retention of fans. Understanding the process, its determiners and constraints holds enormous potential to develop the profits of sports franchises over time.

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APPENDIX 1 – CONSENT LETTER

Informed Consent Letter

*I am conducting research in partial fulfilment of my Masters of Business Administration at the Gordon Institute of Business Science ('GIBS') on sports fan detachment and the process of dissolution. All participating respondents will be asked to reflection their experiences and share insights on the topic. All data collected through the interview process will be kept confidential and all reporting will be kept anonymous. Our interview is expected to last approximately an hour. **Your participation is voluntary and you can withdraw at any time without penalty.** If you have any concerns, please contact either me or my supervisor.*

Our details are provided below.

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Email: goldmanm@gibs.co.za

Phone 011 771 4127

Signature of participant: _____

Date: _____

Signature of researcher: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX 2 – INTERVIEW GUIDE

Type of study: Qualitative exploratory research

Instruments: Audio recorder and note pad

Interview format: Semi-structured and flexible

Preparation before the interview (Saunders & Lewis, 2012)

1. Find out as much as possible about the respondent and where necessary, find out where they work.
2. Choose a location which is convenient for the respondent and has limited noise / distractions.
3. Dress in work attire to ensure that clothing and appearance is appropriate for the interview.
4. Understand which body language will communicate that you are showing an interest and listening attentively.
5. Develop a consent form.
6. Create a methodology to ensure the audio recording is reliable, the recorder has sufficient memory to store the interview and that spare batteries are on hand as an alternate power source.
7. Pilot the questionnaire with a mock respondent and practice taking notes.

Warm up and background (Du Preez, 2012)

1. Take time to build rapport in the beginning
2. Explain the research topic in everyday language and elaborate on the specifics
3. Listen carefully and attentively
4. Be aware of body language
5. Remain neutral
6. Don't put words in the respondent's mouth
7. Responses to be recorded verbatim
8. Probe vague comments and continue to question in order to ensure mutual understanding

1. Introduction (Du Preez, 2012)

My name is Leanne Martin and I am conducting this research in partial fulfilment of my Masters of Business Administration at the Gordon Institute of Business Science.

1.1 Purpose of the interview

Explain that the purpose of the study is to uncover and describe the respondents' perspectives and experiences on the events leading up to and post cancellation of their Blue Bulls / Golden Lions season ticket – that is his subjective view matters. The interview will be used to solicit an understanding of the nature of the process that the respondent went through to make the decision to cancel his season ticket.

The purpose of the interview is to understand sports fan detachment and the process of dissolution. You have been asked to participate in this interview because you were once a season ticket holder for the Blue Bulls / Golden Lions Rugby Club. This means you have exhibited loyal behaviour to the club and now do not watch games as regularly as you have in the past. The aim is to understand the process which led you to cancel your subscription and the events post this decision.

1.2 Interview administration (Du Preez, 2012)

1. Indicate that the interview will take approximately an hour
2. Explain that the interview is semi-structured and the researcher is expecting his subjective account of the events
3. Present the consent form and ensure the respondent signs it and takes a copy with the researcher's contact details
4. Let the respondent ask any clarifying questions
5. Prepare the audio recorder and explain that notes will be taken as back-up
6. Discuss the terms of what will be done with the data from the interview
7. Briefly explain the data collection, analysis and recording process

This interview will take approximately an hour. The aim of this study is to understand the respondent's own lived experience and account of events, so there are no right or wrong answers.

Please read the consent form. As you can see, your responses will be kept confidential and you will be identified by your respondent number and the team you support in the report. You are free to withdraw from the interview at any time.

Your responses will be recorded with this audio tape. Are you comfortable that I am recording this interview?

May I start the interview?

[START RECORDING]

1.3 Interview guide

The following interview discussion guideline was used to fully assess the research question - Sports fan detachment: An exploration of the dissolution process.

Part of the Interview	Research proposition	Area of discussion	Questions	Probing questions
Opening (warm up)		Team repertoire Loyalty to team Loyalty over time	Researcher: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can you give me an overview of the rugby clubs you are aware of in South Africa Researcher: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Which club/s have you previously supported and which club/s do you currently support? Researcher: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Why do you support your team? What is the greatest thing about your team? What do you enjoy the most about your team? Researcher: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Could you describe your loyalty to the team on a timeline indicating when 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> That's really interesting; can you tell me more about that? Can you help me understand how that worked? Why do you think this was the case?

you were most loyal and when you felt least loyal? Please provide reasons for the change.

Main Interview

Proposition 1

The sports fan dissolution process follows a three part process of dissolution (breakdown trigger, breakdown phase, determinant incident), exit and post-dissolution phases as per the consumer / service provider detachment process.

Rationale for the suspension of the season ticket

Breakdown trigger

Time from trigger to determinant incident

Affective and cognitive phases from trigger to determinant incident

Breakdown phase

Determinant incident

Exit

Exit

Post dissolution phase

Researcher:

- Can you help me understand why you no longer have a season ticket? Keep probing why.

Notes: Draw a timeline based on the respondents accounts

Researcher:

- Please tell me, what was the initial incident or reason which caused you to want to suspend your season ticket?

- Could you tell me more about this incident? When did it happen? How did it affect you?

Notes: Probe further around the event that triggered the breakdown phase of the process.

Researcher:

- How long did it take from the moment you knew you wanted to suspend your season ticket to actually terminating it? And why?
- Are you surprised that it took this amount of time?

Researcher:

- Please can explain the process you went through from first realising you wanted to suspend your ticket to acting on it? What were you thinking? What emotions were you feeling?

Researcher:

- Please tell me, all of the events that led up to you actually terminating your season ticket with the Blue Bulls / Golden Lions.
- How many games did you see? Did your behaviour change? Did you have any positive / negative

experiences?

Notes: Probe from the initial trigger to the actual termination and post termination.

Researcher:

- Please tell me, what has happened since you terminated your season ticket with the Blue Bulls / Golden Lions. Do you still feel loyal to the team? Do you still support the team?
- Would you re-instate your season ticket if you could and why?
- What would encourage you to become a season ticket holder again?

Proposition 3

The breakdown phase of sports fan detachment is iterative in nature to break the bonds with the sports object.

Researcher:

- Please tell me if there was any time in the process where it took you some time to make the decision?
- Did you change your mind at any time?

Notes: Probe whether there were any parts of the process which were iterative.

Proposition 2

(1) Unmet expectations of team performance, (2) the appearance of attractive sport or team alternatives and (3) changes in team liking criteria trigger the dissolution process for an allegiant or attached sports fan to become

Team performance trigger / appearance of alternatives / changes in team liking criteria

Researcher:

- What are the things you really like about your team?
- Tell me about the things you really dislike or wish you could change about your team?
- Has it always been this way? Probe timings.

Researcher:

- Which other teams do you support? Have you always supported these

detached from his
team.

teams? Why do you support them?

- Do you support a different team now?
- If so, which team and why?

Notes: Probe if and how the respondent moved from one team to supporting another team. If so, probe the underlying reasons for the change.

Researcher:

- If still supporting the team: Is there anything about the team which makes you want to support them less?
- If not still supporting the team: Are there any further reasons as to why you don't support the Blue Bull's / Golden Lions anymore?

Notes: Probe team performance, player performance, player moves, strong competitor teams, change in lifestyle (new partner, peers, geography etc.)

Proposition 4

The sports fan detachment and dissolution the process is sequential in nature.

Researcher:

- Go through the steps again with the respondent
- To deduce if any steps in the conceptual model were not followed in a sequential manner. Probe respondent if identified.

Closing

That concludes the interview.

Researcher:

- Do you have any additional questions for me?
- Is there anything else you would like to say?

*Notes: is there anything else you want to add.
Anything I misunderstood?*

[STOP RECORDING]

1.4 Post interview procedure (Du Preez, 2012)

1. Thank the respondent for his time
2. Establish permission to contact the respondent again for any clarifying questions
3. Verify if the audio recorder worked throughout the interview.
4. Write down any observations, key take-outs and reflections during the interview (include key views and feeling post the interview)
5. Send key take-outs from the interview to the respondent for interpretive validity
6. Make a back-up of the recording
7. Detail the emerging themes from the interview and review against coding 'start up' list

APPENDIX 3 – CODE START LIST

The adjustments made to the start list during the analysis process are indicated in brackets

(TEAM REPERTOIRE)

(One Team)

(Two Teams)

(Three Teams)

ATTACHMENT

Strength of attachment

Weak attachment

Behavioural loyalty

Attitudinal loyalty

(Decline in behavioural loyalty)

(Decline in attitudinal loyalty)

(Removed Loyalty)

LOYALTY DRIVERS

(Atmosphere)

(Big games)

Coach and staff

(Convenience)

Family

Geography

Management

New partner

Peers

Player moves

Player performance

Social needs

Team performance

(Marketing)

LOYALTY OVER TIME

Consistent

Inconsistent

(NEGATIVE DRIVERS)

Drunk fans

(Not valued)

(Parking)

Safety

(Seating)

(Smoking)

Toilets

DISSOLUTION PROCESS

Primary Decision Maker

Secondary Decision Maker

Breakdown Trigger

Breakdown Phase

Determinant Incident

Exit

Post Dissolution Phase

Emotions

TRIGGER

Unmet Team Performance

Attractive Alternatives

Change in Team Liking Criteria

Internal Constraints

- Lack of Knowledge

- Unmet Team Performance
- Lack of Someone to Attend
- No Interest from Others

External Constraints

- Commitments
- Cost
- Budget
- Leisure alternatives
- Location
- Seating in stadium
- Parking
- Participant sports
- Alternative sports entertainment

BREAKDOWN PHASE – ITERATIVE PROCESS

Non-deliberation

Deliberation

Time

SEQUENCE OF EVENTS

Linear

Non-linear

APPENDIX 4 - QUALITATIVE DATA PREPARATION AND TRANSCRIPTION PROTOCOL

TEXT FORMATTING

General Instructions

The transcriber shall transcribe all individual interviews using the following formatting:

1. Arial 10-point face-font
2. All text shall begin at the left-hand margin (no indents)
3. Entire document shall be left justified

Documenting Comments

Comments or questions by the Interviewer should be labelled with **I:** at the left margin and then indenting the question or comment.

Any comments or responses from participants should be labelled with **P:** at the left margin with the response indented. A response or comment from a different participant should be separated by a return and then a new **P:** at the left margin.

Example

- I:** OK, before we begin the interview itself, I'd like to confirm that you have read and signed the informed consent form, that you understand that your participation in this study is entirely voluntary, that you may refuse to answer any questions, and that you may withdraw from the study at anytime.
- P:** Yes, I had read it and understand this.
- P:** I also understand it, thank you.
- I:** Do you have questions before we proceed?

End of Interview

In addition, the transcriber shall indicate when the interview session has reached completion by typing END OF INTERVIEW in uppercase letters on the last line of the transcript.

Example:

- I:** Is there anything else that you would like to add?
- P:** Nope, I think that about covers it.

I: Well, thanks for taking the time to talk with me today. I really appreciate it.

END OF INTERVIEW

CONTENT

Audiotapes shall be transcribed verbatim (i.e., recorded word for word, exactly as said), including any nonverbal or background sounds (e.g., laughter, sighs, coughs, claps, snaps fingers, pen clicking, and car horn).

- Nonverbal sounds shall be typed in parentheses, for example, (short sharp laugh), (group laughter), (police siren in background).
- If interviewers or interviewees mispronounce words, these words shall be transcribed as the individual said them. The transcript shall not be “cleaned up” by removing foul language, slang, grammatical errors, or misuse of words or concepts.
- If an incorrect or unexpected pronunciation results in difficulties with comprehension of the text, the correct word shall be typed in square brackets. A forward slash shall be placed immediately behind the open square bracket and another in front of the closed square bracket.

Example:

P: I thought that was pretty pacific [/specific/], but they disagreed.

Filler words such as *hm, huh, mm, mhm, uh huh, um, mkay, yeah, yuhuh, nah huh, ugh, whoa, uh oh, ah, and ahah* shall be transcribed.

Inaudible Information

The transcriber shall identify portions of the audiotape that are inaudible or difficult to decipher. If a relatively small segment of the tape (a word or short sentence) is partially unintelligible, the transcriber shall type the phrase “inaudible segment.” This information shall appear in square brackets.

Example:

The process of identifying missing words in an audiotaped interview of poor quality is [inaudible segment].

If a lengthy segment of the tape is inaudible, unintelligible, or is “dead air” where no one is speaking, the transcriber shall record this information in square brackets. In addition, the transcriber shall provide a time estimate for information that could not be transcribed.

Example:

[Inaudible: 2 minutes of interview missing]

Overlapping Speech

If individuals are speaking at the same time (i.e., overlapping speech) and it is not possible to distinguish what each person is saying, the transcriber shall place the phrase “cross talk” in square brackets immediately after the last identifiable speaker’s text and pick up with the next audible speaker.

Example:

P: Turn taking may not always occur. People may simultaneously contribute to the conversation; hence, making it difficult to differentiate between one person’s statement [cross talk]. This results in loss of some information.

Pauses

If an individual pauses briefly between statements or trails off at the end of a statement, the transcriber shall use three ellipses. A brief pause is defined as a two- to five second break in speech.

Example:

P: Sometimes, a participant briefly loses . . . a train of thought or . . . pauses after making a poignant remark. Other times, they end their statements with a clause such as but then . . .

If a substantial speech delay occurs at either beginning or the continuing a statement occurs (more than two or three seconds), the transcriber shall use “long pause” in parentheses.

Example:

P: Sometimes the individual may require additional time to construct a response. (Long pause) other times, he or she is waiting for additional instructions or probes.

Questionable Text

If the transcriber is unsure of the accuracy of a statement made by a speaker, this statement shall be placed inside parentheses and a question mark is placed in front of the open parenthesis and behind the close parenthesis.

Example:

P: I wanted to switch to ?(Kibuli Hospital)? if they have a job available for me because I think the conditions would be better.

Sensitive Information

If an individual uses his or her own name during the discussion, the transcriber shall replace this information with the appropriate interviewee identification label/naming convention.

Example:

P: My supervisor said to me, “P1, think about things before you open your mouth.”

P: I agree with P1; I hear the same thing from mine all the time.

If an individual provides others’ names, locations, organisations, and so on, the transcriber shall enter an equal sign immediately before and after the named information. Analysts will use this labelling information to easily identify sensitive information that may require substitution.

Example:

P: My colleague =John Doe= was very unhappy in his job so he started talking to the hospital administrator at =Kagadi Hospital= about a different job.

REVIEWING FOR ACCURACY

The transcriber / proof reader shall check (proofread) all transcriptions against the audiotape and revise the transcript file accordingly. The transcriber / proof reader shall adopt a three-pass-per-tape policy whereby each tape is listened to three times against the transcript before it is submitted. All transcripts shall be audited for accuracy by the interviewer who conducted the interview.

SAVING TRANSCRIPTS

The transcriber shall save each transcript as an MS Word file with a .doc extension, using the name and surname of the participant as the file name, e.g. leannemartin.doc.

APPENDIX 5 – RESPONDENT PSEUDONYMS AND TRANSCRIPT CODES

Respondent	ATLAS ti Transcript Code
Anna	P1
Nathan	P2
Teunis	P3
Nicole	P4
Eugene	P5
Brian	P6
Nigel	P7
Dean	P8
Sarie	P11
Nico	P12
Ruaan	P13
Elan	P14
Stefan	P15
Sean	P16