

## The Psychological Continuum Model: An Evolutionary Perspective<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

The study of consumer behavior in sport management emphasizes the role of consumer experiences and how these experiences influence perceptions and preferences toward sport products and services. A decision to attend or watch a sporting contest, participate in a recreational event, use a mobile device to gather sport information, or purchase and wear a sport branded T-shirt is based on a number of external and internal forces among which attitudes are particularly influential. This chapter provides a review of a theoretical framework, the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM), that outlines how an individual's attitude toward a sport object (e.g., team, player, sport, activity) initially forms and may change based on social-psychological principles. Over the past 15 years the framework has been developed and refined to advance our understanding of the decision-making process that guides motivations and behaviors in various sport and related contexts, and in different countries. The PCM has been used extensively as a theoretical foundation to guide sport consumer research in order to assist in the development of management actions useful in designing and promoting the optimal consumer experience. In this chapter we explore the PCM from an evolutionary perspective across three important time periods: The Conceptual Period (2001-2009), The Operational Period (2009-2015) and the Contextual Period (2015-Onward). The Conceptual Period includes an overview of the PCM along with revisions and refinements to the framework. The Operational Period presents empirical results utilized to validate and apply the framework in various contexts. The Contextual Period is a look forward at the role of context in the future development of the PCM.

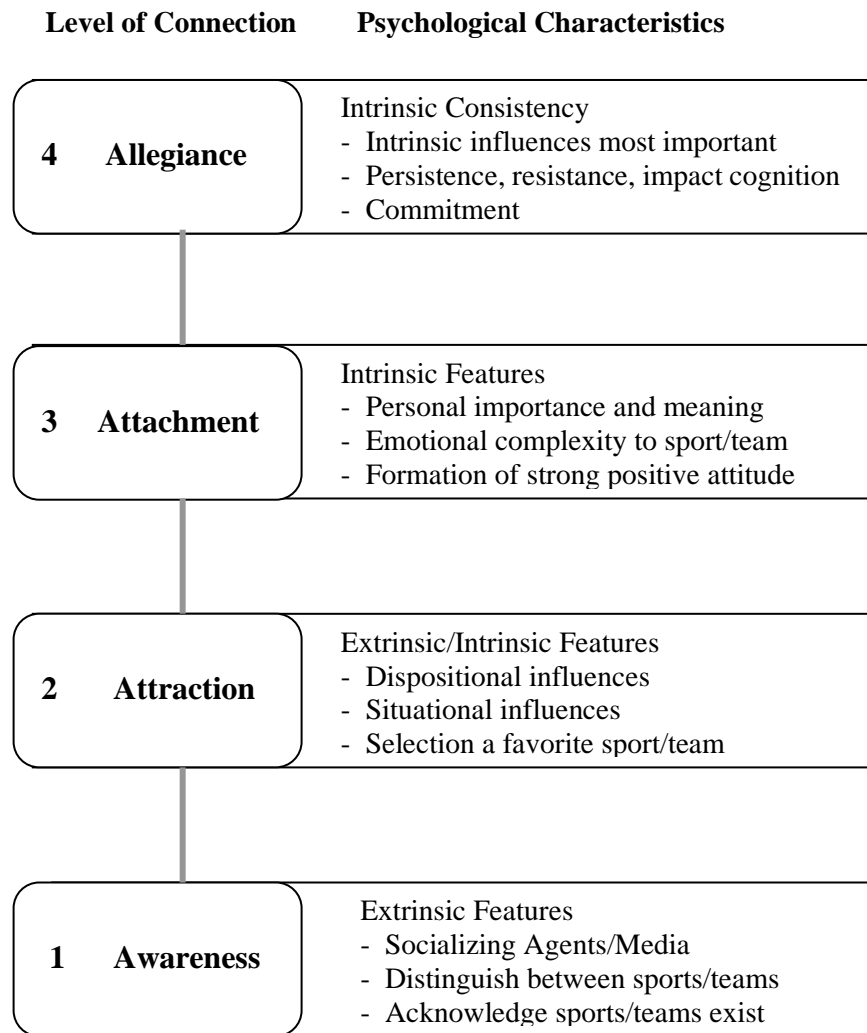
### The Conceptual Period (2001-2009)

The Psychological Continuum Model was introduced in 2001 as a conceptual framework to organize literature from various academic disciplines, and as a guide to advance our understanding of the psychology of sport consumer behavior (Funk & James, 2001). The PCM utilized a hierarchical approach with four stages—Awareness, Attraction, Attachment, and Allegiance—to categorize relevant literature applicable to attitudinal outcomes at each stage. We proposed that sport consumers would move through each stage, with each symbolizing a different stage of attitude formation (i.e., connection) toward a sport object. See Figure 1. The basic premise of the PCM's hierarchy was that an individual would initially develop an attitude toward a sport object and his/her attitude would progressively grow stronger, and the attitude formation could be deconstructed into four stages. In other words, an individual who never played golf nor watched a professional sport team would not go to bed one night and then wake up the next morning and suddenly be an avid golfer or diehard fan. We proposed that various individual and sociological processes would facilitate or inhibit the stage-based movement toward a stronger psychological connection to the sport object. The following section provides a brief review of the stages and progression using a connection with the Philadelphia Eagles of the National Football League as an example.

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<sup>1</sup> Funk, D.C. & James, J. (2016). The Psychological Continuum Model: An Evolutionary Perspective. *In* Cunningham, G., Fink, J., & Doherty, A. *Routledge Handbook of Theory in Sport Management*, pp. 247-260. Routledge Press.

Figure 1. Psychological Continuum Model 2001 (Funk &amp; James, 2001)



The hierarchical structure of the PCM detailed in Figure 1 illustrates a bottom-up vertical progression. As the individual progresses to a higher stage, the psychological connection becomes incrementally stronger. The progression is analogous to an elevator with four floors corresponding to Awareness, Attraction, Attachment and Allegiance, and each floor represents a unique stage of psychological connection between an individual and the Philadelphia Eagles.

### Awareness

The lowest stage at the bottom of Figure 1, the Awareness stage, represents the point at which an individual becomes aware that the football team exists. At this stage the individual has a general level of knowledge (i.e., I know there is a Philadelphia Eagles football team). The awareness occurs from the influence of socializing agents that operate as external forces that introduce the team and shape the initial attitude toward the team. Socializing agents vary by culture and context and typically are parents, relatives, peers, mass media, schools, and sport organizations. At the Awareness stage, the individual is aware of the team but has not yet considered engaging in some form of consumption behavior such as attending or watching an Eagles game. As socializing agents continue to influence the individual and attitude formation is stimulated, an individual is expected to move upward to the second stage of Attraction.

## **Attraction**

The Attraction stage is reached when positive affect toward the team occurs. This positive emotion is triggered when the individual realizes that hedonic and dispositional needs can be fulfilled through some form of consumption behavior related to the team. The individual begins to consider watching and/or attending a game, reading information or talking about the team to acquire psychological benefits ranging from socializing with friends and family, enjoying the performance of athleticism and game strategy, excitement surrounding the event spectacle, self-esteem derived through vicarious achievement, and/or the ability to escape the normal routines of daily life. The Attraction stage is indicative of positive attitude formation toward the team, which manifests through an increased psychological connection (i.e., I like the Eagles). Within the Attraction stage, socializing agents continue to operate as important external forces to create positive associations. As the psychological connection strengthens, subsequent attitude formation and change is driven more by individual psychological processes rather than sociological processes, and movement occurs from Attraction to Attachment.

## **Attachment**

The Attachment stage denotes the formation of a meaningful psychological connection with the football team. This connection forms as the team is internalized into the individual's self-concept aligned with core values held by the individual. Individual processes of integration and individuation that occur over time and across situational contexts govern internalization. Integration occurs when an individual attempts to join with similar others who support the team while individuation occurs when the individual attempts to differentiate his/herself from non-supporters. These self-developmental tasks create a more stable connection with the team based on emotional, functional, and symbolic meaning and lead to identification (e.g., "I am an Eagle"). Attitude formation at the Attachment stage is based on an amalgamation and collective strengthening of associations that provides more stability to the connection. If the relationship with the team continues, this connection continues to strengthen and leads to the Allegiance Stage.

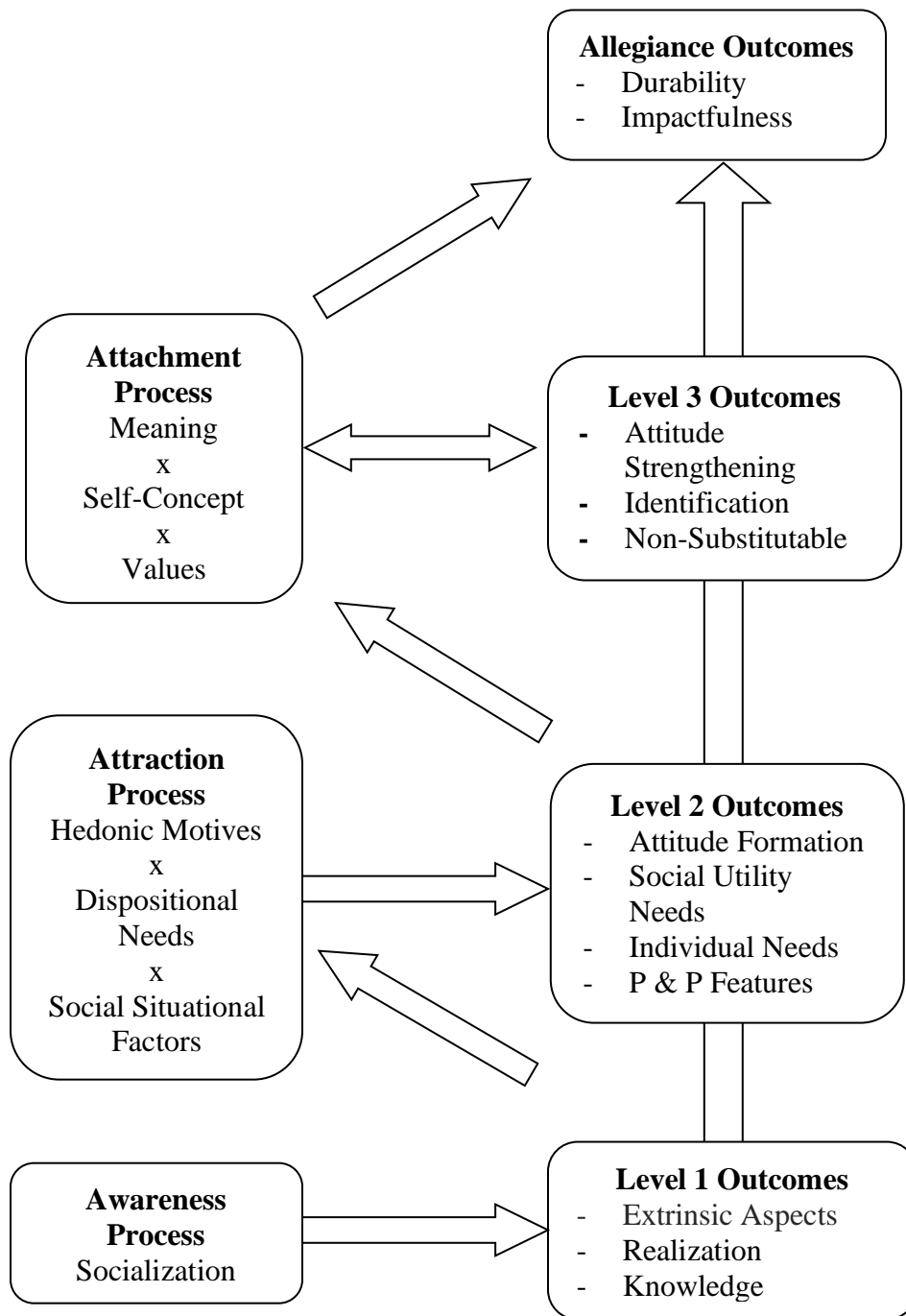
## **Allegiance**

The Allegiance stage represents the strongest psychological connection on the vertical continuum. Allegiance is reached when the attitude toward the team becomes durable and impactful leading to commitment, loyalty, and devotion (e.g., "I live for the Eagles"). Individuals at this stage possess a highly formed attitude that is resistant to change, stable across context and time, influences cognitive processing of information, and is predictive of behavior. The next section includes a description of a revision to the PCM that occurred to clarify what potential forces would cause movement within the continuum.

## **Revisions to the PCM**

The PCM was revised in 2006 to outline movement between stages (Funk & James, 2006). See Figure 2.

Figure 2: Psychological Continuum Model 2006 (Funk &amp; James, 2006)

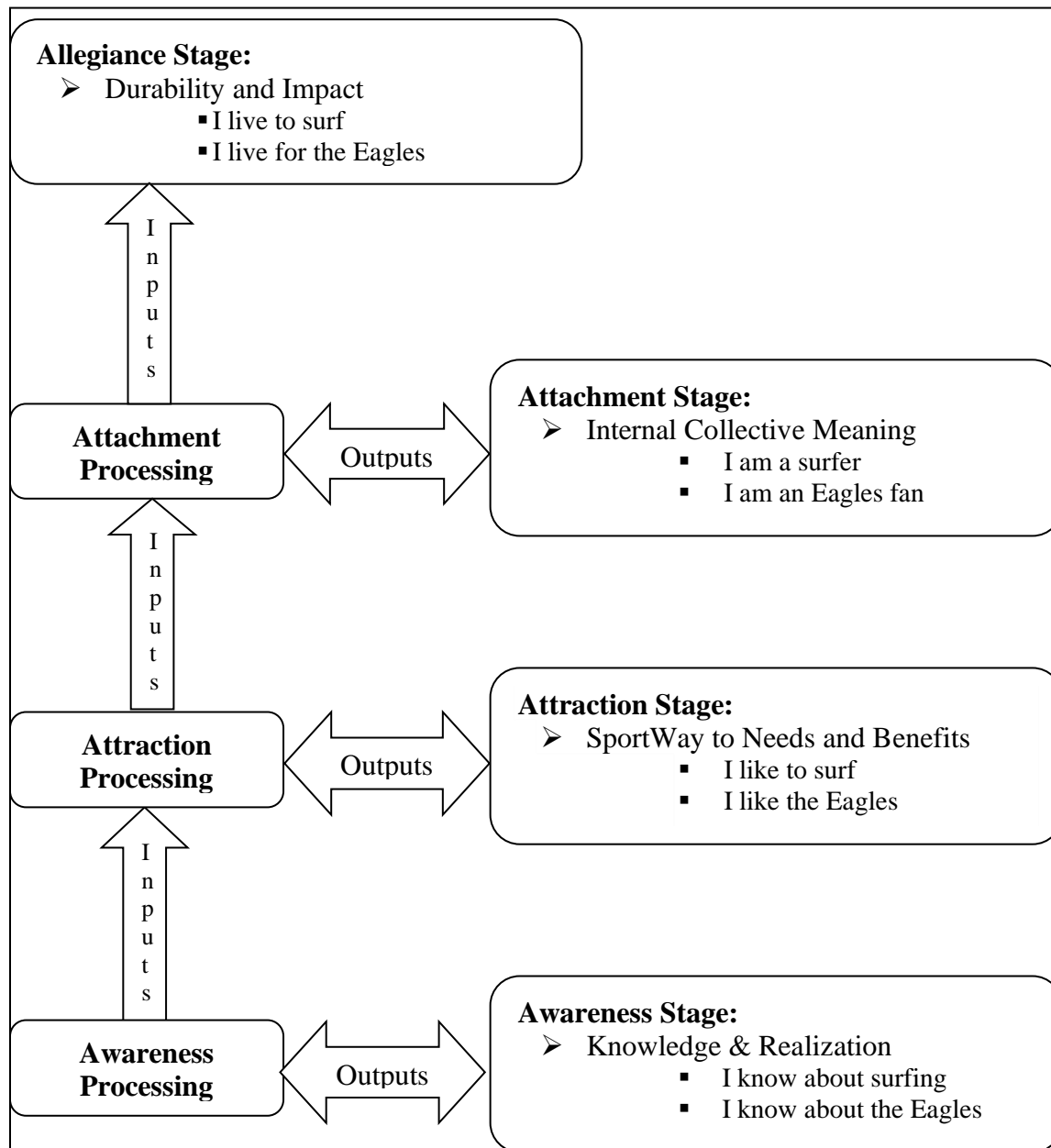


The developmental progression within the vertical framework was advanced through the introduction of a sequence of inputs, processes and outputs that operate within each of the stages. The inputs represent internal and external determinants previously identified in the literature that would potentially influence an individual's psychological connection. The internal determinants were categorized into personal and psychological characteristics while the external determinants were suggested as stemming from a broad range of environmental factors. Three processes labeled awareness, attraction and attachment were positioned as a continuum of processes to illustrate how internal and external inputs form unique outcomes at each stage. Overall, the

revision of the PCM provided greater clarity as to how the psychological connection between an individual and a sport object progressively forms through internal social-psychological mechanisms.

Subsequent revisions to the PCM occurred in 2008 that served to refine and extend its scope. Funk (2008) conceptualized the sequence of inputs, processes, and outputs as operating similar to the consumer decision-making process. See Figure 3. This revision introduced a hierarchical decision-making approach in which the inputs, processes and outputs sequence also contains a recursive feedback loop that operates within each stage and contributes to movement to adjacent stages. This perspective equated the decision-making recursive sequence as the internal mechanism that controlled movement within and between stages to account for the formation and change of the psychological connection. Funk also offered new insight into stage-based outcomes by conceptualizing behavioral engagement as increasing in complexity at each of the four PCM stages through the breadth, depth and frequency of consumption related actions.

Figure 3: Psychological Continuum Model 2008 (Funk, 2008)



The second revision that occurred in 2008 was offered by Beaton and Funk (2008). The authors argued the PCM should be conceptualized as a stage-based framework rather than a continuum model. Beaton and Funk argued the PCM has a structure comprised of statements and concepts that should be viewed as the systematic and detailed explanation that accounts for the *how* and *why* individual's engage in leisure activities. As a framework, the PCM would provide the foundation and rationale for developing and testing new theories in five important ways. First the stage-based structure has the ability to address the complexity and nonlinear patterns of human behavior which overcomes a criticism of continuum models that treat individuals as either engaging in a behavior or not. Second, with the stages concept individuals may be assigned to a specific stage according to certain characteristics that differ from other stages. Third, if different stages do exist, then different forces maybe be at work between the stages. Fourth, movement through the four stages is not governed by a prescribed time function so individuals may have different trajectories as time spent in a specific stage may differ and movement may occur in either direction. Finally, as a stage-based framework the PCM would

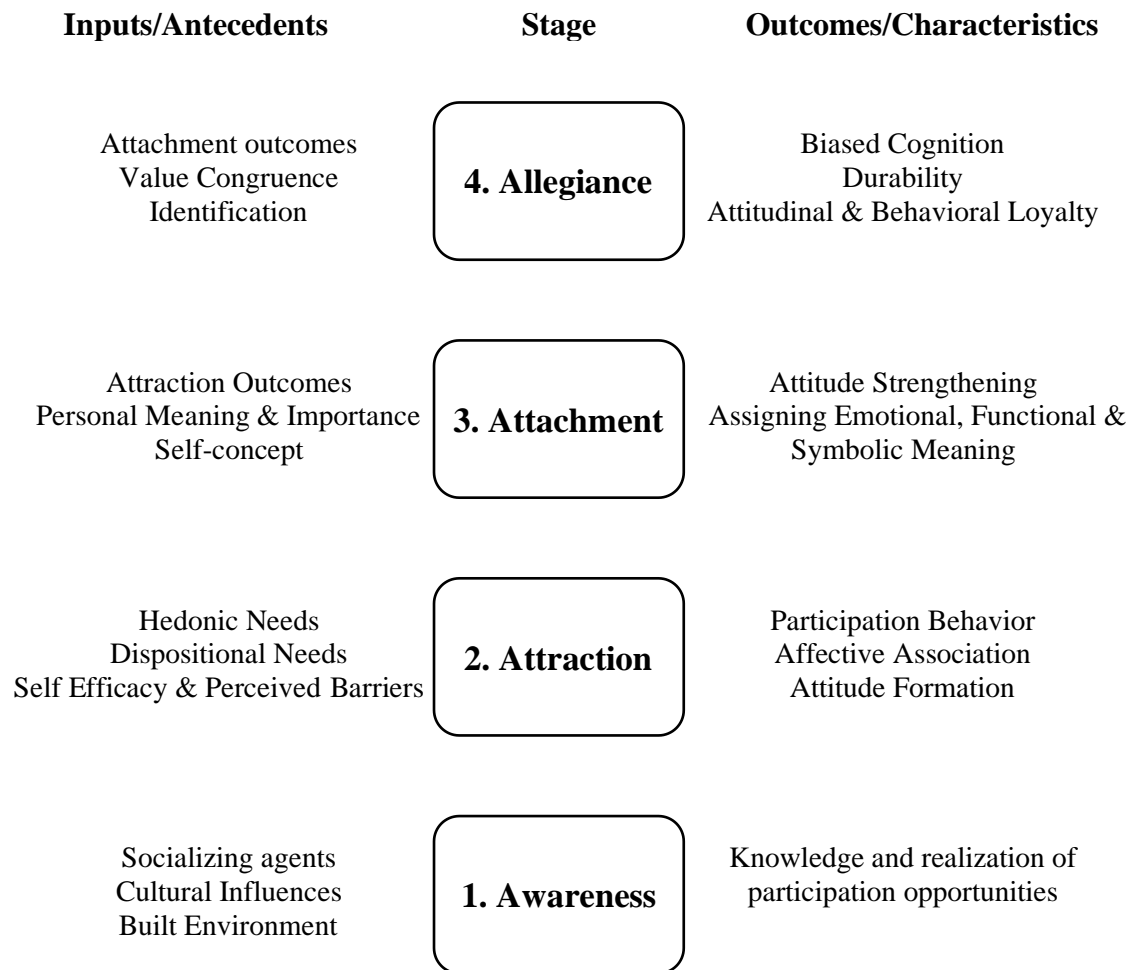
allow researchers to utilize various concepts and constructs to develop and empirically test a theory to explain how a phenomenon works, and the information could be related back to the overall framework serving to advance knowledge in a programmatic manner. This revision highlighted a unique characteristic of the PCM in that it integrates the advantages of both stage based models and continuum models to create a theoretical hybrid; a stage-based continuum model that serves as a framework to study the developmental progression of a psychological connection to a sport, sport-based object, or leisure activity.

The introduction and revisions comprise an important period in the conceptual development of the PCM. This Conceptual Period occurred over a decade, which generally ran from 2000-2010, and provided the foundation for the development of a sound theoretical framework that could be used to study sport consumer behavior and generate new knowledge. Researchers utilized the PCM to examine attitudes and behaviors in a variety of sport environments, including professional, collegiate and international sport, recreational and organized events, non-profits, and fitness facilities. In addition, this research was conducted across numerous countries, including United States, Canada, Australia, Japan, and Greece. The use of the framework in teaching undergraduate and graduate students studying sport marketing and sport consumer behavior also began to emerge during this period. In 2010, the PCM entered into a second period of its evolution, which ran from 2010-2015, as research was primarily devoted to empirically validating the stages and applying the PCM to other leisure contexts. This Empirical Period provided a means to operationalize the PCM and lead to a second generation of knowledge.

### **The Operational Period (2009-2015)**

An important contribution to the PCM was published in the work of Beaton, Funk and Alexandris (2009), prompting a new direction of research devoted to using the PCM as a stage-based framework. The advancement produced a second generation of knowledge largely influenced by limitations and new insight that occurred during the Conceptual Period. A key limitation of the PCM was that a mechanism or staging procedure did not exist to place an individual into one of the four stages. The ability to stage individuals becomes paramount in order to test and falsify propositions regarding personal, psychological and environmental determinants as well as internal processes that may influence or inhibit movement. In addition, some type of staging mechanism would need to be based on a theoretical approach, which would make it applicable to all contexts. In response to this limitation, Beaton, Funk, and Alexandris (2009) developed and empirically tested a method to position individuals within the four PCM stages. See Figure 4.

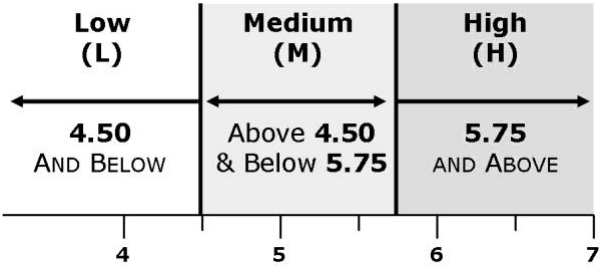
Figure 4. Psychological Continuum Model 2009 (Beaton, Funk, &amp; Alexandris, 2009)



The staging protocol or “staging tool” utilizes a 3-step procedure based on the original tenets of the PCM framework published in 2001 (ref.), proposing the use of involvement facets to distinguish between stages. The first step is to measure three facets of involvement (i.e. pleasure, centrality and sign) and calculate mean scores for each facet. See Figure 5. Step two utilizes predetermined cut points on the 7-point Likert scales to develop profiles of high, medium and low on each involvement facet (see Figure 5). The third and final step employs a qualitative algorithm based on an a priori theoretical configuration of 27 unique profiles to allocate stage membership (see Figures 6 and 7). The authors validated the staging tool for the Attraction, Attachment, and Allegiance stages with empirical data collected from rugby participants in Australia and recreational skiers in Greece. The results provided initial evidence that the staging procedure could accurately place individuals into three stages that revealed intra stage similarities and inter stage differences on involvement and resistance to change. In addition, the diversity of samples provide a robust assessment that the staging procedure could be employed across different sport or leisure contexts, and provide a useful tool for both researchers and practitioners.

Figure 5: Staging Procedure Psychological Continuum Model (Beaton, Funk, & Alexandris, 2009)

	Pleasure		Centrality		Sign	
Item 1	P1	= 4	C1	= 6	S1	= 5
Item 2	P2	= 5	C2	= 5	S2	= 6
Item 3	P3	= 4	C3	= 5	S3	= 6
Item 4	P4	= 5	C4	= 5	S4	= 6
Total Score		= 18		= 21		= 23
Average		= 4.5		= 5.25		= 5.75



Involvement Profile		
Pleasure	Centrality	Sign
L	M	H

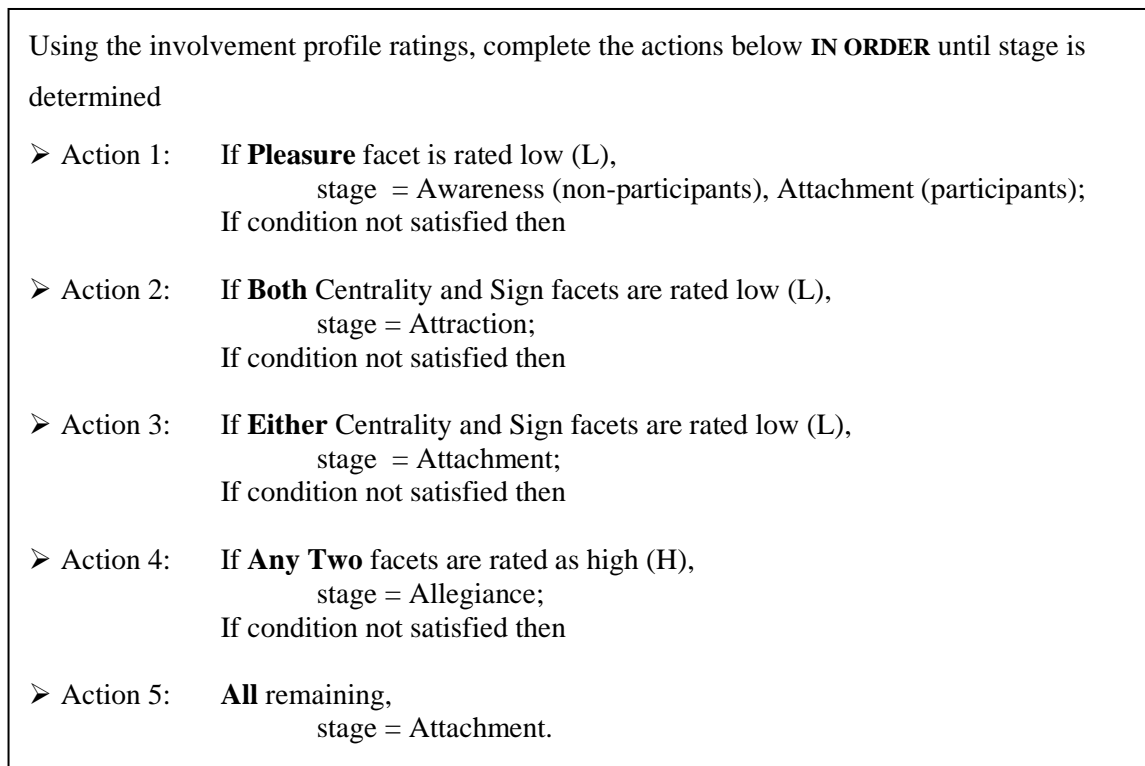
Figure 6: Theoretical Distribution of Involvement Profiles across PCM Stages (Beaton, Funk, & Alexandris, 2009)

Awareness			Attraction			Attachment			Allegiance		
*P	C	S	P	C	S	P	C	S	P	C	S
<sup>a</sup> L	L	L	M	L	L	L	L	M	M	H	H
			H	L	L	L	L	H	H	H	M
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\*: P=Pleasure Facet; C=Centrality Facet; S=Sign Facet

a: may be Awareness if a non-participant, or Attachment if a participant

Figure 7. Staging Algorithm for Psychological Continuum Model (Beaton, Funk, & Alexandris, 2009)



The Operational Period ushered in a substantial amount of research applying the PCM framework to various research contexts and domains. The PCM has been used as a theoretical and empirical diagnostic tool to conceptualize and empirically validate attitudes and behaviors in sport management, recreation, event management, and tourism contexts. The staging procedure has been applied to sport spectators and fans of collegiate and professional sport teams and leagues, recreational running, golf, skiing, rugby, tennis, softball, organized event participants in road races and triathlons, and tourists traveling to participate in events. Research has been conducted in numerous countries including the United States, Australia, Greece, Iran, Japan, New Zealand, South Africa, and South Korea. Taken together, this body of works provides evidence to the ecological validity of the framework. In addition, the PCM framework has now been integrated into a number of texts and chapters as well as content for students in various countries. Industry adoption of the framework has seen it applied to mass participation sport events, horse racing, collegiate and professional spectator sports, charity events, analysis of collegiate alumni donations, and longitudinal studies in youth sports development. The industry application has largely utilized the PCM as a segmentation tool to create consumer profiles and tracking movement between stages to determine conversion rates and cost of marketing investment.

The Operational Period also witnessed two notable extensions to the PCM that served to provide an alternative approach to conceptualize and operationalize the boundaries of the framework. The first occurred in 2011 in which Funk and colleagues conceptualized and empirically verified the four stages as a linear continuum that represented the relationship between attitudinal and behavioral engagement to recreational golf (see Figure 8) (Funk, Beaton, & Pritchard, 2011). A positive relationship between the degree of attitudinal engagement and the frequency and

complexity of behaviors was depicted as a linear regression slope of stages. However, the authors argued that if attitude and behaviors were not consistent, a quadric slope pattern would likely occur. A second extension utilized this relational stage approach to develop a new perspective on sport brand architecture. Kunkel and colleagues (2013) utilized the PCM segmentation procedure to place individuals into one of the four PCM stages, but did this process for both a professional league and team playing in that league, and compared stage placement consistency (see Figure 9). Three types of consumer groups were found to exist: a) co-dominant group in which the individual was equally involved with the league and team (i.e., placed in equal stages of the PCM for both team and league), b) a team dominant group in which the team stage placement was one or more higher than the league stage placement and c) a league dominant group in which the league stages was higher by one stage or more than the team stage placement. The results provided new evidence that the brand relationship of leagues and teams is perceived differently by consumers based on their psychological connection, and that the professional league can operate as an external force.

Figure 8. Psychological Continuum Model 2011 (Funk, Beaton, & Pritchard, 2011)

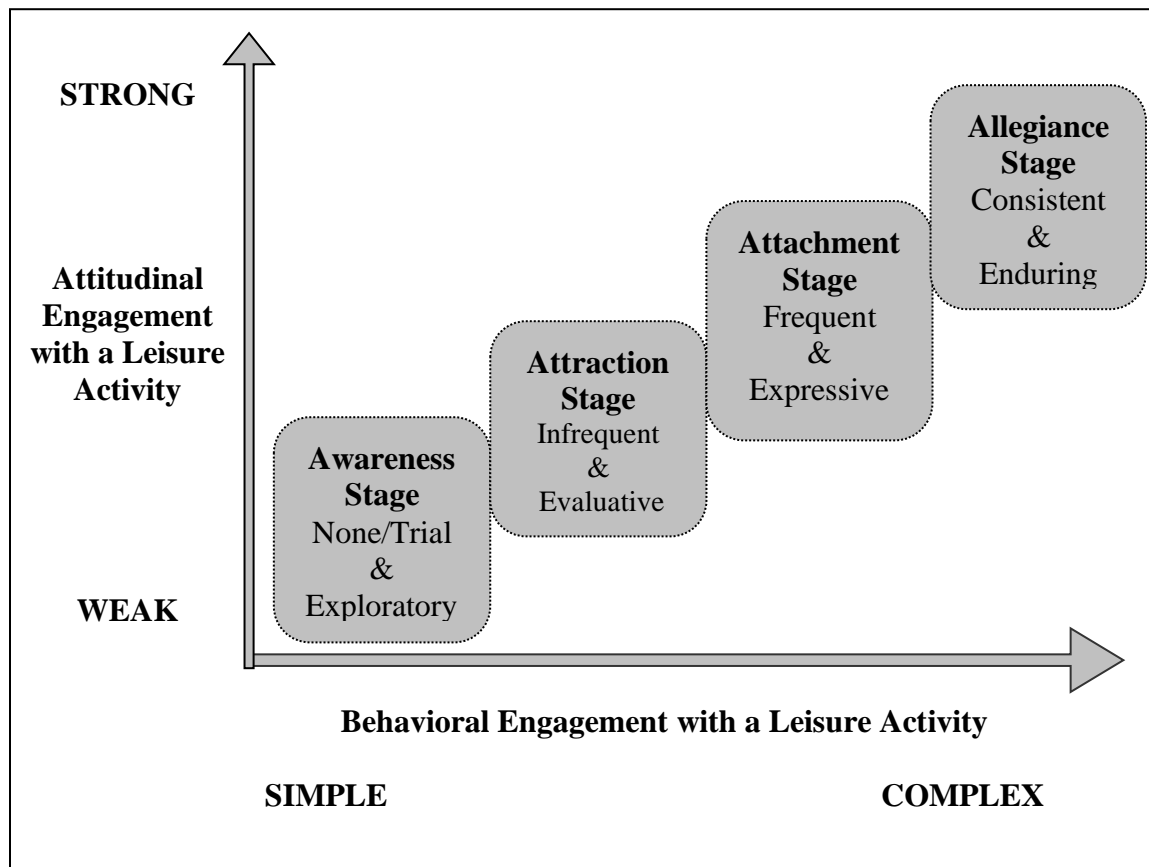
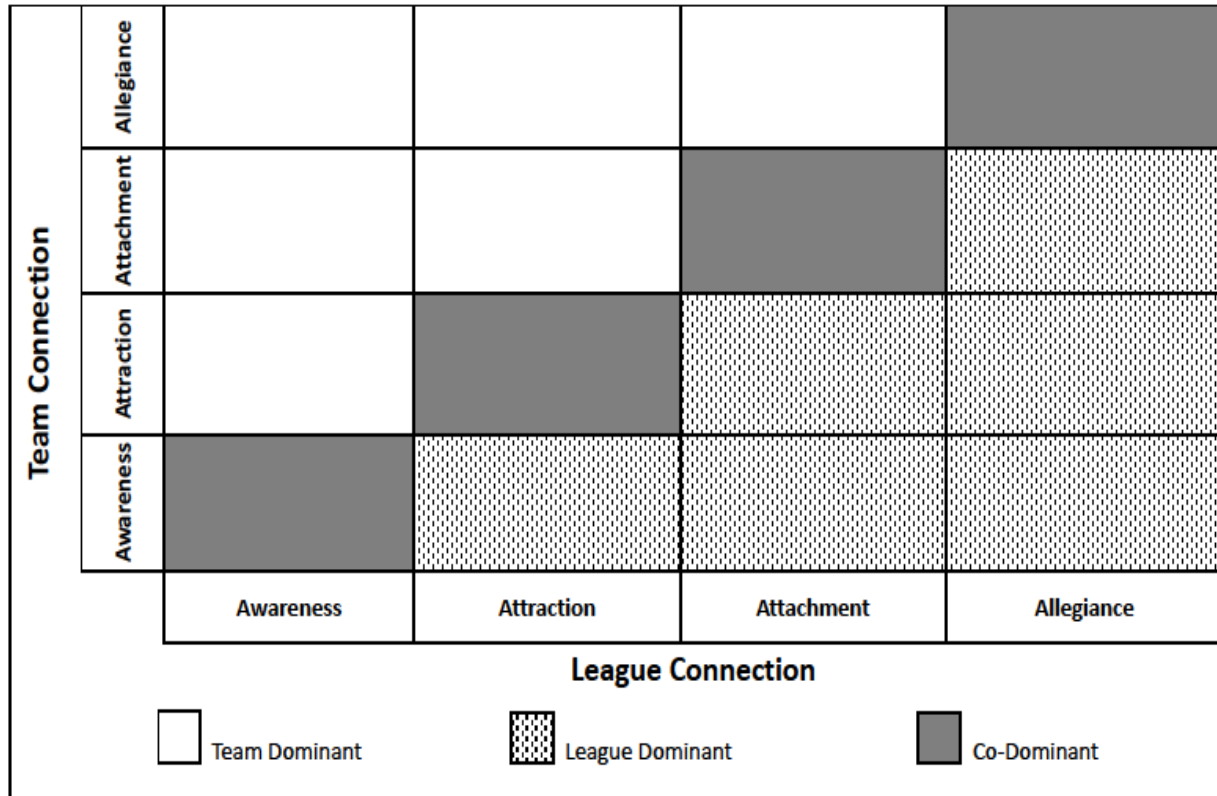


Figure 9: Psychological Continuum Model 2013 (Kunkel, Funk, &amp; Hill, 2013).



The Operational Period provided a substantial body of empirical evidence in support of the PCM framework. However, this evidence and research also revealed several limitations and situations in which the PCM did not account for a particular phenomenon or did not operationalize the entire population correctly. For example, in empirical studies up 10% to 20% of the participants could be miss-specified into the wrong stage. It was also observed that attitudinal and behavioral stages were not consistent for a segment of the population. The question as to why a small group of individuals or a subset of the population did not follow theoretical predictions has become a fruitful area for future study. Also, the relative influence of external factors (environmental forces) on the psychological connection as well as movement remains theoretical, especially within the lower stages of attraction and awareness. Taken together, the conceptual and empirical support for the PCM combined with the limitations and criticisms directed at the framework, suggest the emergence of a third period of research will now begin. A period in which context matters as an important step to spur future research and advance the PCM. This period will be called the contextual period.

## **The Contextual Period: (2015 to Present)**

Previous research has shown the utility of PCM across many contexts, and empirically supported the stage-based framework with quantitative and qualitative evidence. The Contextual Period will embrace an exploration of the nuances of the consumer context. The Contextual Period will primarily focus on the environmental experience in order to better understand what influences stage placement as well as transitions between stages. This should be driven by a service experience design approach in which the consumer experience is considered a journey through which many interactions occur between an individual and a sport organization, and this interaction is a management function. From this perspective, an interaction represents a touch point in which a consumer encounters information, a physical element, or any type of external stimuli managed by the organization through various channels (i.e., email, advertising, website, parking, venue atmosphere, etc.). The touch points equate to a series or amalgamation of potential consumption points that have both temporal and geographical parameters that operate in a system. Research in the contextual period should include examinations of these consumption touch points as they operate in a service system design framework, to advance our understanding of what influences the progressive development of the psychological connection. This information will generate new knowledge on managerial and social determinants but will require a change in research approaches.

In the Contextual Period a premium will be placed on research designed to investigate unique experiences in order to develop new insight on service design to advance the PCM framework. We have been able to explain the perceptions of service by consumers, but not how the design of the service works. Given that services are largely based on the interactions between organizations and the motivations and behaviors of consumers, understanding people will be a key aspect. Such research will require both qualitative and quantitative techniques to examine the breadth and depth of consumption points as well as the nuances of the experience as a design system. Initially, the focus will likely be context dependent with in-depth fieldwork to deliver new insight, and generalizability of results will be a secondary consideration. This will require researching the experience as it happens, as the use of post event surveys or on-line panels about an experience can suffer from memory decay. Efforts will be needed to map out a behavioral system or sequencing of behaviors and testing prototypes of simulated behavior. Without this approach it will be difficult for researchers to create a comprehensive and customized blueprint of consumption points to measure and capture the complexities of the experiential journey, which includes the service design. Segmentation should also occur at the consumer journey level to understand the timeline of the experience and relative influence of consumption points (i.e., pre-event, event, post event). In addition, the temporal segmentation approach can be used in conjunction with the PCM staging procedure to examine key interactions (i.e., Time X PCM X Consumption Point). This information will provide valuable insight for our understanding of the relative influence of how consumption points operate as inputs in the decision-making sequence within the PCM stage-based framework. This information is expected to generate new understanding of a specific context, and differences across contexts. For example, if one experience design system works in one context (e.g., basketball) but not another (e.g., baseball), then identifying the reason or mechanism to explain divergent results will lead to new knowledge and theory testing.

The Contextual Period will also require revisiting developments that occurred within the Operational Period. For example, the allocation procedure used to stage individuals into one of the four stages of the PCM will require further work in three important ways. First, the involvement dimensions of pleasure, centrality and sign used to calculate profiles to employ the

algorithm will require psychometric development and testing to ensure discriminant validity. The original items used to measure the involvement facet were adapted from existing scales in recreation, and future work would be well advised to develop these survey items “from scratch” using established scale development procedures. While the adapted scales have performed adequately, a fresh approach drawn from the perspective of sport participants and sport spectators would likely add contextual richness to prospective measures. It is also possible that participants and spectators may provide ideas that are unique to each context, which should be included in prospective measures of the involvement constructs. Second is the use of the sign dimension with its strong identification component. This may require a reconceptualization using a divergent approach of two types of self-definitions of identity: internal (how I define myself) and external (how I perceive others defining me). Third is the use of analytic work on the predetermined cut-points in Figure 5 to: (a) create context specific profiles, and (b) create transitional stages. The context specific work should consider making it more difficult to achieve a “high” profile on a specific involvement dimension (e.g., moving the cut-point from 5.5 to 6.0). The transitional stage work should focus on creating boundaries that overlap two of the existing PCM stages; for example, a boundary stage that contains the upper portion of the Attraction stage and the lower portion of the Attachment stage. This could be done to create three additional transitional stages using the existing cut-points. These boundaries could be used to identify individuals ready to transition upward or downward to a new stage. If it is possible to capture such transitional staging, further insight and knowledge may be acquired as to what mechanisms, and how such mechanisms, drive transitions among the stages.

The Contextual Period will highlight the service design elements that collectively define the sport management context. Ultimately what sport management is selling is an experience through a system of consumption points. Funk (2008) noted, “Sport consumer behaviour is about the journey not the destination” (p. 4), to describe how watching or participating in a sport event is about an experiential journey. As part of this journey, the individual encounters a management system that utilizes particular functions to provide information about how a specific service or product satisfies internal needs, and how a particular experience may deliver desired benefits to the consumer. Researchers working with the PCM who adopt the concept of consumer experience design approach will provide new information for successful operations since sport management is the result of the effective amalgamation of service marketing and management strategies.

## **Conclusion**

No matter where in the world one may travel, no matter what culture(s) one may interact with, a common denominator is sport. Whether one’s interest is participating in some type of sporting event, watching sporting events played by family members, amateur athletes, or professional athletes, we cannot escape the prominent place of sport in societies. Said another way, people all around the world connect with and through sport. Funk and James (2001) started out to develop a mechanism with which “to guide our understanding of the underlying social-psychological process accounting for an individual’s shift from initial awareness of a sport or team to subsequent allegiance” (p. 120). A keen observer will be able to recognize that the connection with or interest in sport and related objects (e.g., teams, players, activities) varies from the person with the casual knowledge that a professional football team exists, for example, to the individual who “lives and dies” for his or her team.

The PCM (Funk & James, 2001) originally provided a means by which researchers could better understand the different types or stages of connection. From that point, it was a natural

progression to identifying and striving to understand the mechanism or processes operating at different stages and along the continuum. The revisions to the PCM and advances in our understanding have moved us beyond just assessing how an individual's attitude toward a sport object initially forms and may change, to utilizing a stage-based continuum model that serves as a framework to study the developmental progression of a psychological connection to a sport, sport-based object, or leisure activity. As noted, the PCM is now utilized to advance our understanding of the decision-making process that guides motivations and behaviors.

As we move forward, the time for closing the knowledge loop is on the horizon. In many ways we have come full circle in the study of sport consumer behavior. Very early research focused on activities within the control of management, such as pricing, packaging, and distribution, as critical activities. We have progressed to periods in which we have sought to focus more on the consumer rather than the product; the evolution of the PCM provides an illustration of our journey to better understand the individual consumer perspective and perception. As we look to the Contextual Period, we return to mental and physical elements, to touch points that are within the control of management. We do not, however abandon our knowledge of the consumer; rather, through frameworks such as the PCM we recognize the importance of understanding both the individual and the context in which consumption takes place, the internal and external factors that influence consumer behavior. We continue striving to further develop the PCM as a means by which to better understand the complex, dynamic subject that is sport consumer behavior

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