

Brand positioning through external communities: A tale from collegiate athletics

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Abstract 163**

Brand community research has gained much notoriety over the last decade. Although research so far has focused on organizations that offer products such as cars, motorcycles and computers (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig, 2002; Muniz Jr & O'Guinn, 2001), it is not farfetched to expand the thought of brand community to sport teams, which arguably form some of the strongest brand communities in the world. Based on characteristics of brand community proposed by research so far, sport teams are excellent examples of brand communities. First of all, members have a very strong feeling of 'we' towards the brand and feel the urge to express this feeling after wins of their favorite team, a term often referred to as Basking in Reflected Glory (Cialdini et al, 1976). Second, many fans of sport teams have developed their own rituals and/or traditions, or follow the rituals/traditions of the team, whether this is participating in the tomahawk chop at Florida State University Seminoles, singing along with the crowd at FC Liverpool games or even imitating the Haka dance at games of the New Zealand national rugby team. Thirdly, fans often celebrate history and look back on accomplishments, whether this was a championship, a great upset or a star player. Finally, many fans feel a moral responsibility to stay with their team and stay loyal to them even though the team is unsuccessful (Funk & James, 2006). However, brand community research so far has focused on the relationship between consumer and the organization in a vacuum. It has yet to explore the influences that the membership of an individual to other communities has on its membership to the brand community (sport team).

The purpose of this study is to look at the influence of these external communities on the relationship between fan and team (Heere & James, 2007a). It is proposed that we could measure the strength of a brand community by measuring the identity of its consumers with the organization. Using the group identity scale of Heere and James (2007b), the authors measured the identity of students with four of the communities surrounding them (college football team, university, city and state) at three comparable universities in the Southeastern part of the United States, namely the University of Florida, the Florida State University and the University of Miami (N: 872). It is proposed that the way the respondents identified with their favorite college football team was influenced by the way they identified with the other communities surrounding the team. In addition, it was proposed that each college football team has its own unique set of communities that influence the identity process of the fan with the team.

The authors further refined the Group*ID scale developed by Heere & James (In press). Reliability and validity testing of the refined scale demonstrated a reliable and valid Group*ID scale across the different settings (University: RMSEA: 0.077; SRMR: 0.043; CFI: .980, College football team: RMSEA: 0.097; SRMR: 0.059; CFI: .971, City: RMSEA: 0.074; SRMR: 0.034; CFI: .986, State: RMSEA: 0.077; SRMR: 0.036; CFI: .983) with all AVE's for each construct in each setting scoring above .5 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Reviewing the strength of the group identities of the students at the three different institutions, it appears that across the board that students of the University of Florida more strongly identify with their college football team and the university, the students of the University of Miami more strongly identify with their city and the students of Florida State University score higher on certain elements of the state identity.

The authors performed a regression analysis of the influence of the external group identities on team identity at the three different universities, and the results indicated that compared to the other two college football teams (UF: r square = .643, FSU: r square = .593), the University of Miami Hurricanes (r square = .322) appears to be more isolated from their external group identities than the other two college football programs, and is less influenced by these external (brand) communities than is the case at the two other college football programs. A possible consequence of this more isolated position is that fans of University of Miami Hurricanes perceive it to be easier to cut themselves off from the team (Snyder, Lassegard & Ford, 1986) than fans would do in the other two settings.

The results of this study indicate that sport teams do not only form excellent examples of brand communities, they also form excellent research settings to measure the impact of external communities on one particular brand community. In addition, the results lend support that a strong relationship between a sport team and the communities surrounding them can provide the team with extra points of attachment between them and their fans and fans are less likely to abandon the team in times of

hardship.