

Does Awareness of NASCAR's Diversity Initiatives Influence Consumer Intentions: The Mediating Role of Corporate Image

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Diversity
Abstract 2009-076

May 29, 2009
9:00 AM

25 minute oral
(Richland B)

The National Association for Stock Car Racing (NASCAR) is fast becoming the most popular spectator sport in the United States. Evolving from what has historically been identified as a rowdy source of entertainment for the American South (Hall, 2002); NASCAR has strategically evolved into "America's sport". Descriptively, NASCAR has presented itself as patriotic and embracing strong family and moral values (Derbyshire, 2003). As some researchers note however, such ideals promote and uphold the gendered and racialized history of motorsports in general, and within NASCAR in particular (cf. Kusz, 2007; Newman, 2007). Recent lawsuits filed against NASCAR alleging sexual and racial discrimination may substantiate such claims. As expressed by one claimant (i.e., Mauricia Grant) minority harassment was inherent within NASCAR such that sexist and racist beliefs perpetuated at the managerial ranks and were generally accepted practice (Fryer, 2008).

Coupled with NASCAR's history, Grant's statements point to the potential institutionalization of gendered and racialized practices surrounding the organization (see Zucker, 1987). Indeed, the traditions of motorsports and the historical context in which NASCAR was conceived continue to be reflected in the characteristics of the majority of its stakeholders (e.g., the sport's drivers, crews, team owners, and executives). Likewise, they influence the perceptions held toward nearly everything related to the NASCAR brand and thus construct NASCAR's image (Caraviello, 2008). By most accounts, the (stereo)typical NASCAR fan continues to be an unintelligible, Confederate flag-waving, White, Southern, good 'ol boy, despite the increased interest in NASCAR across North America (Hugenberg & Hugenberg, 2008). This image of the sport reflects a reality that is observable in "...the absence of non-White consumer subjects on the track, in the stands, and in NASCAR's corporate hierarchy itself" (Newman & Giardina, 2008, p. 493).

According to Scott (1987), phenomena are institutionalized when, on the basis of historical precedent, tradition, and habit, they are accepted without hesitation. Consistent with this definition, the NASCAR environment is fraught with institutionalized practices that maintain a lack of diversity on the track and a perceived of a lack of diversity off of the track (cf. Cunningham, 2008; Derbyshire, 2003; Newman, 2008). Simply put, despite billing themselves as "America's sport", NASCAR fans and participants fail to mirror the true demographics of the American population. As a result, NASCAR has implemented several diversity-related programs and marketing initiatives with the intent of diversifying not only their organization, but also the motorsport industry as a whole. The most recent program, the "Drive for Diversity" initiative implemented in 2004, has sought to develop minority drivers and crew members for NASCAR competition. NASCAR has utilized this initiative in an effort to appear more social responsive, engaging a greater number of stakeholders in their operations and responding to the mounting social concerns of institutionalized behavior.

Given the history of NASCAR's institutionalized context and resultant image of the sport, the primary purpose of this study was to assess if social awareness could lead to positive outcomes for the organization. Specifically, the authors sought to determine if consumer awareness of NASCAR's diversity initiative could positively predict various forms of patronage toward NASCAR. In addition, the researchers sought to determine if and how corporate image associations influenced this relationship. On the basis of prior research (e.g., Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Klein & Dawar, 2004; Lichtenstein et al., 2004), we expected individuals who were aware of NASCAR's Diversity initiative to view the organization positively, resulting in positive behavioral intentions. NASCAR event attendees were sampled (n=213) via intercept technique, prior to two large, east-coast races [male: 128 (60%); female: 85 (40%)]. The social awareness construct was developed using guidance from previous literature (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001), while the remainder of the questionnaire incorporated items to measure corporate image (Nguyen & Leblanc, 2001) and patronage intentions (James, 2006). Reliability testing revealed sufficient levels of internal consistency for all variables (social awareness, $\alpha=.79$; word-of-mouth, $\alpha=.85$; merchandise consumption, $\alpha=.92$; media consumption, $\alpha=.86$; corporate image, $\alpha=.78$). Validity testing of the patronage construct revealed an adequate fit of the data ($X^2(df)=75.650(24)$, $X^2/df=3.152$; SRMR: 0.042; GFI=.930; NFI=.944) and all AVE scores were well above .50 cutoff, thereby denoting a discriminant factor structure (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Based on previous research (e.g., Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Nguyen & Leblanc, 2000; Sen et al. 2006) we hypothesized that the degree to which consumers were aware of the Drive for Diversity would positively influence their intentions to patronize the organization (H1) and their assessment of NASCAR's image (H2). Additionally, we hypothesized (H3) that NASCAR's image would fully mediate the relationship between social awareness and consumer

2009 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2009)

patronage intentions. We tested the key pathways that constituted our conceptual framework using a series of three regression models based on Baron and Kenny's (1986) criteria for mediation: (Model 1) patronage intentions predicted by social awareness; (Model 2) corporate image predicted by social awareness; and (Model 3) patronage intentions predicted by social awareness and corporate image. Because of the possibility of correlated errors, we estimated the three equations in a step-wise fashion using multivariate regression analyses. In the first regression model, social awareness had a significant and positive effect on one type of patronage ($\beta_{\text{media consumption}}=.191$, $R^2=.008$, $p<.05$; M1), providing partial support for H1. In the second regression model, social awareness had a significant and positive effect on corporate image ($\beta=.201$, $R^2=.061$, $p<.05$; M2), fully supporting H2. In the third model, we inserted social awareness and corporate image simultaneously in the regression and found that the effect of social awareness on corporate image had a significant and positive effect on the three patronage outcomes: ($\beta_{\text{word of mouth}}=.474$, $R^2=.252$, $p<.001$; M3), ($\beta_{\text{merchandise consumption}}=.496$, $R^2=.122$, $p<.001$; M3), ($\beta_{\text{media consumption}}=.498$, $R^2=.158$, $p<.001$; M3). These findings show that corporate image partially mediated the effect of social awareness on patronage intentions due to the non-significant relationships in Model 1 (Shrout & Bolger, 2002); and thus partially supports H3. Together, our findings suggest that consciousness of NASCAR's social awareness (i.e., the Drive for Diversity Initiative) lead consumers to view NASCAR in a more positive light. This enhanced image of NASCAR subsequently increased the likelihood of consumer's behavioral intentions. Finally, by showing that corporate image plays a prominent role in the awareness-patronage relationship, organizations may capitalize on multiplicative associations that consumers attribute to social and diversity initiatives. Implications for academicians and practitioners will be discussed.