Effects of Sport Team-Public Relationships on Team Identification

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Team identification is defined as an extension of self-identity in a sport fan from psychological connection to the team (Trail, Fink, & Anderson, 2003). Identification with sport teams has been considered an important notion in the area of sport marketing and communication because it has an effect on spectators’ attendance decisions (Trail, Anderson, & Fink, 2000), generating positive attitude for sponsored products (Madrigal, 2000), developing consumer satisfaction (Madrigal, 2003), increasing fan attendance (Wakefield & Wann, 2006) and facilitating impulse buying (Kwon & Armstrong, 2002). Although building strong fan identification with a sports team is a crucial factor to obtain a stable fan base, there has not been much research on how to increase team identification and its relationship with organization-public relationships (OPR).

OPR is the degree that the organization and its publics trust one another, agree on one has rightful power to influence, experience satisfaction with each other, and commit oneself to one another (Haung, 1998, p.12). A variety of public relations (PR) activities have been considered to strengthen OPR as well as serving as an effective marketing communication tool for enhancing the image of organizations (Roy & Graeff, 2003). Sport teams have also been increasingly active in PR activities via corporate philanthropy or corporate community relations in order to develop relationships with their fans because successful PR activities for the community result in a strong base of loyalty with a sport team (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 1994). Thus, in order to take full advantage of team-public relations, the sport team has to specify its targeted fan, and when its targeted fan is aware of the team public relations, the team can expect the positive relationship with its targeted fan (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998).

The purpose of this study, therefore, is two-fold: (1) to examine the effects of perception of PR activities for the community on team-public relationships and (2) to investigate how the identity with the team will be affected by the constituents of the team-public relationships. A multi-dimensional OPR model including personal, professional, and community relationships derived from Bruning and Ledingham (1999) was utilized as the conceptual framework to evaluate the relationship between a major Division I college baseball team and its students.

In the current study, a between-group experimental design was employed to examine the effects of perception of PR activities on team-public relationships and to examine if an association between team-public relationships and team identification may exist. Participants included 298 undergraduate students from a major university in the southeastern region of the United States that were randomly assigned to an experimental group (exposure to PR activities) or a control group (no exposure). The results of the MANOVA indicated that the effects of perception of PR activities were significant for sport team-public relationships (Wilks’ E = .866, F [3, 294] = 15.16, p < .000). Univariate F-tests also supported that the differences in three constituents of the sport team-public relationships were statistically significant between the experimental group and control group: personal: F(1, 296) = 7.19, p = .01; professional: F(1, 296) = 32.70, p < .000; community: F(1, 296) = 24.38, p < .000. Thus, students having perceived the team’s PR activities had higher sport team-public relationships than students not having perceived the team’s PR activities.

Results of the multiple regression revealed that the model R2 of .48, reflecting the overall strength of association between three constituents of sport team-public relationships and team identification, was statistically significant at the .05 level: F(3, 294) = 89.86, p < .001. Examination of the Beta coefficient also indicated that the effects of personal (t = 8.52, p < .000), professional (t = 2.57, p = .011), and community (t = 3.05, p = .002) relationships on team identification were significant at the .05 level, controlling for the other variables. In particular, the unique contributions of personal, professional, and community of the model R2 were respectively .132, .012, and .017, which suggested that three constituents of sport team-public relationships were important in explaining team identification.

The present study is intended to provide knowledge of PR activities’ effect in improving public relationship and identification with a team because PR activities are constantly recognized as critical strategies for sport marketers to position themselves more effectively in the competitive market place. This study will also assist sport marketers in understanding significant dimensions of sport team-public relationships and their impact on team identification. Finally, since it is obvious that sport team/fan relationships are different from organization/public relationships, the development of an adequate scale will be required to enhance an understanding of sport team-public relationship.