An Examination of the Impact and Evaluation of Brand Equity in NCAA Division I-A Football: A Case Study of the University of Notre Dame

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The purpose of the current study was to examine the impact of Tyrone Willingham’s tenure as head football coach on the brand equity of the University of Notre Dame. Brand equity is traditionally viewed as a cyclical phenomenon (Gladden, Milne, & Sutton, 1998) with longitudinal examinations being the preferred method of evaluation. As such, this case study focuses on a three-year time period for reasons grounded in the literature and, in this particular case, the practical consideration that Tyrone Willingham’s tenure at the University of Notre Dame lasted three years.

Brand equity can be intensified locally and expanded globally (i.e., beyond Notre Dame) given the long-standing tradition of Notre Dame football and, as of the beginning of the 2004 season, Willingham’s being one of only five African American NCAA Division I-A football coaches. The team, the football program, the University of Notre Dame community, and the community beyond the Notre Dame campus are evaluated as part of this brand equity equation. The brand equity equation explains the process of developing brand equity as interplay between team, institutional, and market forces or antecedents (Gladden et al., 1998). Particularly evaluating brand equity in the sport setting should include both tangible and intangible indicators. Each of the antecedents of brand equity (i.e. success, star players, reputation and tradition, conference and schedule, entertainment package, media coverage, geographic location, competitive forces, and support) have been represented strongly at Notre Dame over the course of the last fifteen years. The one antecedent that has been an exception as far as being strongly represented has been the head coach since Lou Holtz’s departure in 1996. Therefore, in examining the football program, this case study focused on the perceptions of brand equity from Tyrone Willingham’s introduction as the new head football coach of the University of Notre Dame in December of 2001.

The study involved 22 semi-structured individual interviews with athletic administrators (senior associate athletic directors and assistant athletic director), alumni (alumni association, black alumni board, and football alumni), university employees (admission office, bookstore, enrollment management, licensing office, multicultural admissions coordinator, and news and information office), local community (convention and visitor bureau, restaurant, regional airport, and College Football Hall of Fame), and document analysis. The results indicated that the Tyrone Willingham’s tenure as head football coach impacted significantly both tangible (i.e. revenue) and intangible (i.e. public perception) indicators of the brand equity of the University of Notre Dame. But by firing Willingham, the university placed the tangibles ahead of the intangibles. The results of the study examine the value of intangible indicators in evaluating whether or not Notre Dame made the right decision. Those in the athletic department commended Willingham on his discipline, the attitude and respect shown by his players, and their classroom performance. Football alumni, Black alumni, and multicultural admissions program strongly believed that it was important to have him as head football coach for racial significance. However, university officials stated clearly that Willingham’s record was not good enough. Additionally, local business owners found that business did suffer when the team lost. Bowl game revenues were down and despite the lucrative NBC contract, Notre Dame appreciated the financial implications of a team that did not live up to the historical .750 winning percentage enjoyed by Notre Dame Football. Did Notre Dame do the right thing in terms of improving their brand equity by terminating a coach who had mixed on-field results in his three year tenure, but had stellar off-the-field results and was one of only five African American Division I-A football coaches at the time of his firing? It would seem that Notre Dame ignored many of the intangibles that Tyrone Willingham brought to the table in favor of the powerful dollar.