A Conceptual Framework for Understanding Cause-Related Sport Marketing: Focusing on the Moderating Role of Fan and Organization Identification

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Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has emerged as one of the most promising communication tools among corporations (Pirsch, Gupta, & Grau, 2007). Emerging CSR trends are attributed to consumers rewarding socially responsible companies (Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006) and even punishing unethical firms (Palazzo & Basu, 2007). Consumers increase their buying power through accessing information about the corporations’ activities (Urban, 2005); thus, they may become more aware of whether or not firms are socially responsible. In addition, CSR initiatives can provide a variety of benefits such as generating a positive corporate image (Smith & Stodghill, 1994), enhancing product evaluation (Brown & Dacin, 1997), and attracting high quality employees (Turban & Greening, 1997).

Among diverse CSR initiatives, cause-related marketing (CRM) has been referred to as a strategic marketing tool of corporations in recent decades (Nan & Heo, 2007). CRM is different from philanthropy or sponsorship in that it connects consumer purchases directly to supporting a social cause (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988). Pringle and Thompson (1999) defined CRM more broadly as “a strategic positioning and marketing tool which links a company or brand to a relevant social cause or issue for mutual benefit” (p. 3). Therefore, according to their definition, CRM is a more purposeful strategy than any other CSR programs because the corporation expects a return on their investment (Adkins, 1999).

The sport industry is not isolated from the emerging CSR trends; rather, it is actively involved in societal marketing initiatives (Babiak & Wolfe, 2006; Extejt, 2004; Roy & Graeff, 2003). Utilizing Pringle and Thompson’s (1999) definition, Lachowetz and Gladden (2002) built a conceptual framework for understanding CRM in spectator sports. In addition, they created the term, cause-related sport marketing (CRSM), defined as “strategic sport marketing aimed at creating a mutually beneficial link between a company, sport organization or athlete, and a social cause through the use of sports events and programs” (p. 319).

For the purpose of this presentation, I will employ the definition of CRSM developed by Lachowetz and Gladden (2002). In the CRSM framework, Lachowetz and Gladden (2002) presented four essential conditions for successful CRSM programs: resonance of cause with organization’s target market, organizational commitment to the CRSM program, tangible exchange between the cause and the organization, and promotion of the CRSM program. These conditions would lead to create, enhance, or reinforce brand association then finally CRSM would generate enhanced brand image, enhanced brand loyalty, and consumer brand switching as outcomes.

This CRSM framework contributed to the sport management literature through explaining how CRSM can develop brand equity. However, their model lacks some important variables on which CRM research has focused, such as company’s motivation for engaging in CRM (Barone, Miyazaki, & Taylor, 2000; Becker-Olsen, Cudmore, & Hill, 2006), timing (Becker-Olsen, et al., 2006), donation magnitude (Strahilevitz, 1999), and customer identification with a cause organization (Cornwell & Coote, 2005).

Therefore, this study aims to develop a conceptual framework for understanding CRSM by including significant findings from the business literature. First, the limitations of the frameworks suggested by Lachowetz and Gladden (2002) will be discussed; then, a new conceptual framework will be proposed through examining the verified factors from the literature. More specifically, based on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), I will focus on the moderating role of fan identification and organization identification on the effect of CRSM on consumer attitudes. In the alternative proposed model for CRSM, four antecedents (sport/cause fit, sport organization’s motivation, timing, and the tangible exchange between sport and cause) are redeveloped because previous CRM studies indicated that those variables were the main four factors affecting CRM effects on consumer behavior constructs. The new model explains the four factors influencing on consumer attitudes toward CRSM. At the same time, consumer attitudes lead to two possible outcomes (brand image and purchase intention). Most significantly, the new model includes a moderating fan and organization identification variable based on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In other words, the four antecedents may have a different impact on consumer attitudes toward CRSM, according to the extent to which fans show high or low identification with sports and cause organizations. For instance, the proposed model maintains that if consumers identify highly with sports teams or athletes implementing CRSM, the effect of the antecedents might be weak. However, if fans identify less with sports or related causes, the impact of antecedents might be stronger.
Future research would be needed to examine this relationship empirically. Academic efforts in sports have not investigated the cause-and-effect relationship in the CRSM domain. Therefore, beyond the survey or descriptive studies, experimental work will be helpful in understanding the proposed framework for CRSM. From a practical standpoint, the proposed model could provide an essential idea in order to construct an effective CRSM strategy. An advertising or promotion strategy focused on CRSM could be refined according to fan or organization identification levels. If sport marketers want to maximize the effect of CRSM, they need to understand who the target audiences are and how much they identify with the organizations.