The Role of Fan and Cause Identification in the Success of Cause-related Sport Marketing

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The sport industry is considered an ideal field in which to deploy corporate social responsibility initiatives due to its many unique features, including mass media distribution, youth appeal, and positive health impacts (Smith & Westerbeek, 2007). Many professional sports leagues, franchise teams, individual athletes, and mega sporting events are actively implementing and participating in socially responsible events, promotions, and sponsorship programs (Babiak & Wolfe, 2006). These initiatives have been conceptualized as cause-related sport marketing (CRSM) and may take many forms (Lachowetz & Gladden, 2002). For instance, companies can sponsor sporting events that make contributions to charity. The FedEx's sponsorship of the FedEx-St Jude Classic golf tournament is one such example (Lachowetz & Irwin, 2002). Sport organizations can also initiate such initiatives themselves by offering part of their proceeds to a cause organization or as part of their own community relation programs. The National Basketball Association (NBA), for example, named its social responsibility efforts NBA Cares, and has employed such public campaigns as Read to Achieve, Nothing but Nets, and Basketball without Borders (NBA, 2009).

With increased interest in social responsibility initiatives in the sports industry, cause-related sport marketing (CRSM) started to emerge as a new area of investigation. Recently, studies on CRSM have started to flourish (e.g., Irwin, Lachowetz, Cornwell & Clark, 2003; Roy & Graeff, 2003; Smith & Westerbeek, 2007). One particular argument for a focus on the sport industry is the high degree of identification and emotional connections associated with sports, which can potentially make CRSM programs more differentiated and effective (Lachowetz & Gladden, 2002). Hence, among others, fan identification and identification with causes are arguably important factors to consider when examining the effectiveness of CRSM programs.

The literature of cause-related marketing (CRM) suggests that congruence between a brand (or a sport organization) and a cause (e.g., Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; Bloom et al., 2006; Nan & Heo, 2007; Pracejus & Olsen, 2004) as well as consumer identification with a company/brand (Gupta & Pirsch, 2006) and a cause beneficiary (Cornwell & Coote, 2005) are important factors affecting consumer responses to CRM campaigns. Preliminary work conducted by the authors of this abstract also indicates that consumer identification with a sport team and a cause organization can potentially moderate the relationship between congruence and the effectiveness of CRSM. For example, consumers' preference for a high-fit relationship between a sport organization and a cause (e.g., MLB and a Baseball Tomorrow Fund) may be more evident among those consumers highly identified with the sport organization or sport overall. Moreover, Barone, Norman, & Miyazaki (2007) indicated that the effects of company/cause fit on consumer responses are moderated by consumer affinity with the beneficiary. Therefore, according to these findings, it would be plausible to contend that a CRSM initiative may be more effective among those consumers highly identified with the sport organization as well as among those highly identified with the beneficiary.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the moderating roles of fan identification and identification with a cause organization in the relationships between sport/cause fit, consumer attitude toward CRSM, and purchase intention. Based on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and previous findings, the authors proposed a theoretical model of the relationships between sport/cause fit and consumer attitude toward CRSM and purchase intention, moderated by consumer identification with a sports team and a cause organization. Considering the fact that previous studies have mainly focused on professional sports (e.g., Irwin et al., 2003; Roy & Graeff, 2003), this study examined these relationships within the context of intercollegiate athletics. In addition, this study adopted a transaction-based association between a sport organization and a social cause, where contribution to the cause was hinged upon the consumer engaging in a sales transaction with the organization (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988).

To test the proposed model, participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: a high-fit or a low-fit initiative between an intercollegiate football program in a large Southwestern university and social cause organizations. Both groups were asked to read a hypothetical advertisement of a team-licensed apparel describing a $1 donation to a social cause, and to answer scaled items about their attitudes toward the message, identification with the sport team and related cause, and purchase intention of the product in the message. In the high-fit...
condition, respondents saw the advertisement describing a donation to organizations previously identified in a pretest as highly congruent (Pop Warner Football League and Boys and Girls Club) with the football program. In the low-fit condition, respondents saw the same advertisement, but the donation featured causes that were previously identified as lowly congruent (Human Rights Campaign and Planned Parenthood) with the football program. The sample (N = 309) consisted of undergraduate students enrolled in several physical activity classes at a large southwestern university.

In addition to the manipulation of fit, constructs used in the study consisted of attitudes toward the message, fan identification, purchase intention, and organizational identification. Attitudes toward the message was measured based on Burton and Lichtenstein's (1988) and Lichtenstein and Bearden's (1989) research as six semantic differential items (Cronbach's α=.96). Fan identification was measured by the items (Cronbach’s α=.90) of the Sport Spectator Identification Scale (Wann & Branscomb, 1993). Organizational identification was measured by six Likert-scale items (Cronbach’s α=.92), based on Bhattacharya, Rao, and Glynn (1995) and Mael and Ashforth (1992). Three items were used to measure purchase intention (Cronbach’s α=.91), adopted from Grewal, Krishnan, Baker & Robin (1998) and Kwon et al. (2007). For manipulation check, participants were also asked to rate three items to indicate the degree of fit between the intercollegiate football team and related beneficiary after reading the CRSM message (Keller & Aaker, 1992).

A structural equation model (SEM) was employed to examine the relationships among the constructs. The model was constructed following Marsh, Web, and Hau's (2004) recommendations for estimation of interaction effects using SEM. The results of the SEM model showed a good fit for the proposed model ($\chi^2$ (df=33, n=618)=135.17, p<.001; RMSEA=.07; GFI=.96; CFI=.97; PNFI=.58; AIC=201.17). The model supported a moderating role of identification with the sport organization and cause in the relationship between fit and attitudes toward CRSM. Although attitudes toward CRSM were higher in high-fit conditions than in low-fit conditions, even higher attitudes were observed with higher levels of identification with the sport organization. The higher the levels of identification, the more positive individuals’ attitudes were toward a high-fit CRSM. These results suggest that the degree of consistency between a university football team and a cause may reinforce the image of the sport program from which individuals already identify, which in turn can generate a greater impact on attitudes.

In addition, the higher the levels of identification with cause organizations, the more positive individuals’ attitudes were toward high-fit (e.g., college football team and Boys and Girls Club) and low-fit initiatives (e.g., college football team and Human Rights Campaign), but pronouncedly more so in low-fit conditions. These results are in line with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) in that individuals who are highly identified with a cause evaluate sport-related CRSM initiatives more positively as they may consider the cause as in-group relationships regardless of whether the cause itself has a consistent image with football. These results suggest that the success of a CRSM does not depend not only on fit, but also to the degree to which consumers identify with the cause. Therefore, a cause that is not congruent with a sport/event may still be successful depending on how relevant it may be to the target audience.

In conclusion, this study provides theoretical as well as practical implications. The proposed model supported significant moderating impacts of fan and organizational identification in line with social identity theory (Abrams & Hogg, 1990). From a practitioner’s standpoint, the results suggest that cause-related marketing programs can be potentially successful in the context of intercollegiate sport licensed products with carefully designed CRSM programs. Specifically, CRSM initiatives involving programs that possess a high degree of congruence with sport programs and are highly valued among consumers have the potential to be more effective.