Examining Style of Processing Across Levels of Identified Fans

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Sports fans are a unique group of consumers, and process information in a variety of ways based on their values, beliefs, attitudes, loyalty, identification (Stewart, Smith & Nicholson, 2003). Some fans follow a favorite team on the internet or watch games on television, while other fans enjoy attending live sporting events. Each fan experiences sport differently, and fan identification and loyalty vary significantly. Sport marketers are often confronted with the need to satisfy a variety of segments and demographics (Redden & Steiner, 2000). For instance, a casual fan who attends only a few games each season might be more interested in the halftime entertainment than the athletic contest. As sport teams and organizations such as the National Football League (NFL) have seen gate revenue and profits decrease recently, predicting consumer behavior and satisfying various market segments has become increasingly important (Kaplan, 2009).

Given that every fan experiences sport in a unique way, and sport brand loyalty differs significantly even among fans of the same team, it is reasonable to theorize that sport consumer’s process information differently. In traditional marketing and consumer behavior literature the effect of Style of Processing (SOP), or a consumer's preferred method of information processing, on consumer behavior has been clearly documented (Childers, Houston, and Heckler's, 1985). However, SOP has rarely been utilized as a conceptual framework to better understand sport consumer behavior. Consequently, the purpose of this study was to investigate the potential differences in styles of processing based upon team identification.

Method

Measurements of processing style and identification were collected from 410 individuals. These individuals were collected utilizing a snowball sampling method, where students affiliated with a large Midwestern university served as the first-wave recruits. Typically, the use of a student only sample is considered appropriate given that they are significant consumers of sport (Biswas & Sherrell, 1993). However, the use of snowball sampling methods allows for more variation of respondent characteristics, thus allowing the study sample to be much more representative that a narrowly defined, homogeneous convenience sample of college students.

First, specific target sports were elicited by asking respondents to indicate one specific professional team. Style of processing was then measured using Childers, Houston, and Heckler’s (1985) Style of Processing (SOP) scale. The 22-item scale assesses the preferences and propensity of individuals to engage in verbal and/or visual modalities of processing information about one’s environment. The SOP scale includes 11 items reflecting visual processing styles, and 11 items reflecting verbal processing styles. The Sport Spectator Identification Survey (SSIS), developed by Wann and Branscombe (1993), was used to measure the level of team identification.

Analysis

While the use of snowball sampling methods are common in business research (Blair & Zinkhan, 2006), potential biases of this respondent driven technique still exist. In order to combat biases, a random subset of the data was selected. This randomized selection allows for the potential communalities between first-wave recruits and those secondary respondents to be diminished. The random case selection option in SPSS was utilized to select a subset of the sample containing approximately 75% of the 410 respondents (N=307).

These 307 cases were then grouped based on responses to the SSIS. Based on the original research by Wann and Branscombe (1993) respondents were classified into a Low Identification group (N=14), Moderately identified group (N=111), and High Identification category (N=177). Before any analysis was conducted to achieve the purpose of the study, Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was examined to ensure the consistency of the SOP scale. After establishing...
reliability, multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was utilized to determine if there were differences in the SOP dimensions.

Results

Examination of the Cronbach’s alpha coefficients revealed that the SOP was reliable (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). When inspecting the raw mean scores for each identification group, the results indicate that the Low Identification group (M=4.52) has higher propensities to process information through verbal mechanisms. Additionally, those High Identification respondents (M=4.24) showed greater propensities to process information verbally than those in the Moderate Identification segment (M=4.16). In terms of visual processing styles, Low Identification respondents (M=3.60) scored higher than the Moderate Identification (M=3.51) and High Identification (M=3.42) segments. However, using Wilk’s criterion, the MANOVA suggested no significant differences between the groups on the style of processing dimensions (L=.987 F (4, 596) = .941, p=.440).

Conclusions and Implications

Sport marketers are often confronted with the need to communicate with a variety of segments and demographics. Understanding how various segments process potential promotion and advertising content is critical. The current research suggests that all types of identified fans hold similar processing styles, thus implying no need to tailor specific types of print advertisements for each segment. Additionally, the results point to implications for in-game sponsorship activation. That is, results suggest all individuals regardless of identification are more likely to process information verbally. Therefore, when sponsors design strategies for sponsorship activation in the stadiums and arenas, the use of verbal-based massages should be stressed as compared to visual imagery. Additional managerial implications will be discussed during the presentation.