The Influence of a Sport Team on Donation: The Moderating Role of Team Identification

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In October 2005, the National Basketball Association (NBA) launched its broad social responsibility initiative, NBA Cares, to address social needs in the United States and around the world. Since the program’s inception “… players and teams have raised more than $115 million for charity, provided more than one million hours of hands-on service, and built more than 460 places where kids and families can live, learn or play in communities around the world” (NBA, 2010). Not only the NBA and its teams but also other sport leagues (i.e., Major League Baseball, National Football League, and National Hockey League) have their own foundations. More than 400 professional athletes and teams are involved in public charities and private foundations (Babiak et al., 2007). According to the Sports Philanthropy Project, some professional franchises have raised funds and disbursed grants of more than $2 million to help underserved, low-income children improve their fitness and reduce obesity (e.g., Boston Red Sox Foundation, Memphis Grizzlies Foundation, and Houston Texans). This involvement is one of the many ways in which they have been addressing corporate social responsibility (CSR). Although almost all teams and leagues are connected to fundraising and charitable efforts, a limited amount of research has examined the effect a team’s reputation could have on actual or potential donor behavior. Therefore, the purpose of this study is twofold: (1) to explore how the reputation of a sport team influences its fans’ attitude (i.e., cognitive awareness and affective evaluation) toward CSR, which ultimately affects donor behavior, and (2) to examine the moderating role of team identification on the relationship between reputation and attitude toward CSR.

Reputation is “… a distribution of opinions (the overt expressions of a collective image) about a person or other entity, in a stakeholder or interest group” (Bromley, 2001, p. 317). Researchers have found that reputation can positively influence consumers’ product evaluation (Goldberg & Hartwick, 1990), level of trust toward the corporation (Eastlick, Lotz, & Warrington, 2006; Keh & Xic, 2009), and other attitudes such as satisfaction and loyalty (Helm, 2007), behavioral intentions (Caruana, Cohen, & Krentler, 2006), and purchase decisions (Page & Fearn, 2003). Specifically, Williams and Barrett (2000) found a strong association between reputation and corporate giving programs. In this respect, there might be a positive relationship between the reputation of a team and its CSR involvement. Walker and Kent (2009) revealed that a team’s CSR activities are positively related to reputation. That is, if a team has a positive reputation, individuals should demonstrate a positive attitude toward the team’s CSR programs. Based on these findings, we propose the following:

**Hypothesis 1:** Team reputation will positively influence the attitude (i.e., cognitive awareness and affective evaluation) toward the team’s CSR.

Fishbein and Ajzen (1975, p. 6) defined an attitude as “… a learned disposition to respond in a consistently favorable or unfavorable manner.” Based on their work, many researchers have attempted to describe attitude-formation processes. In particular, Hirschman (1984) and Zajonc and Markus (1982) assumed that cognition and affect are both related to consumers’ attitude formation. Based on previous findings, Walker and Heere (2010) developed a scale to measure sport consumers’ attitudes toward CSR with regard to cognitive awareness and affective evaluation of the CSR. Some of the literature indicates that CSR awareness positively influences consumers’ purchase intentions, as well as their long-term loyalty and advocacy behavior (Sen, Bhattacharya, & Korschun, 2006; Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2007). Many studies have also found that the affective elements are closely related to consumers’ perceptions and behaviors (e.g., Gardener, 1985; Willkie, 1994; Solomon, 1994). In light of these works, we propose the following:

**Hypothesis 2:** Attitude (cognitive awareness and affective evaluation) toward the team’s CSR will positively influence donor behavior.

Team identification is “… personal commitment and emotional involvement customers have with a sport organization” (Sutton, McDonald, Milne, & Cimperman, 1997); it is also described as a fan’s feeling of belonging or psychological attachment to a team (Branscombe & Wann, 1991). In the sport literature, some have found a strong relationship between team identification and consumers’ cognitive, affective, and behavioral intentions, including self-esteem (Trail, Anderson, & Fink, 2005), perceptions of other fans (Wann & Grieve, 2005; Wann & Polk, 2007), and attendance (Trail, Anderson, & Fink, 2000; Wakefield, 1995). More specifically, previous studies have indicated that fans’ different levels of psychological attachment lead to different consequences (Funk & James, 2001; James, Kolbe, & Trail, 2002). In terms of attitudes toward CSR, team identification should have significant influence on the donor intentions dynamic. For example, Walker and Kent (2009) demonstrated the moderating role of team identification on the relationship between CSR and reputation. These findings led to the development of our third hypothesis:
**Hypothesis 3**: Team identification will moderate the relationship between team reputation and attitude toward CSR.

To examine the relationships among team reputation, attitude toward CSR, and team identification, data will be collected via a questionnaire from actual and potential donors to nonprofit organizations represented by sport teams. The questionnaire will include Caruana and Chircop’s (2000) scale to measure team reputation, Walker and Heere’s (2010) scale to measure attitudes toward CSR, and the Sport Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS) developed by Wann and Branscombe (1993) to measure team identification. Then, the data will be analyzed with structural equation modeling to test the proposed hypotheses.

Identifying factors that influence donor behavior and understanding donor motivations will help to promote future donations. The findings of this study will assist sports franchises as well as sport-related nonprofit organizations to develop effective and appropriate fundraising strategies and to effectively manage their reputations. In addition, the findings will enhance the growing body of literature related to donor perceptions toward nonprofit sectors.