The Impact of Brand Equity Drivers on Consumer-Based Brand Resonance in Multiple Sport Product Settings

Brian Gordon, University of Wisconsin-LaCrosse

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The realm of professional sport has grown exponentially in both size and scope in the last two decades. According to current estimates, the sport industry is a $231 billion dollar industry (Sport Business Journal, 2006). In response to an increase in consumer demand, sport organizations have embraced traditional business management principles to adapt and survive in this competitive environment. As a result, sport executives view their properties as brands to be managed (Ross, 2006). Gladden, Irwin, and Sutton (2001) noted that “2000 to 2010 will be the decade in which team management activities evolve from a focus on winning as a means of realizing short-term profits to a focus on strategic management of the team brand as a means of realizing long-term appreciation in franchise value” (p.298).

Brand equity is the value added to a product due to the brand name (Aaker, 1991). It has received a considerable amount of attention in the sport marketing literature. However, the process by which consumers become loyal to a given sport brand has not been clearly explicated by previous research. The lion’s share of research in the sport marketing literature has focused on only one source of brand equity: brand associations (Gladden & Funk, 2001, 2002; Ross, James, & Vargas, 2006; Bauer, Sauer, & Exler, 2008). Previous research has largely ignored the potential role that consumer’s cognitive evaluations and affective responses may play in the relationship among the sources of brand equity and consumers’ behavioral intentions. Therefore, this study operationalized a consumer-based brand equity model based on Keller’s (2003) brand equity pyramid that explains how sport consumer perceptions influence brand resonance. The consumer-based brand equity scale was comprised of five constructs related to brand equity: brand awareness, brand associations, brand superiority, brand affect, and brand resonance.

A pilot test in both the sporting goods and sport spectating context (n = 288; n = 231) provided initial validation of the measurement items constructed in the item generation stage. More specifically, results from an exploratory factor analysis showed that brand associations was comprised of two dimensions in the sporting goods context (attributes and benefits) and three dimensions in the sport services context (attributes, benefits, and service personnel). In both contexts, brand resonance was found to be comprised of two dimensions: sense of community and active engagement. Furthermore, minor item modifications were made to the other constructs of interest (brand awareness, brand superiority, brand affect) to ensure the reliability and validity of the measures.

The main study included data collected from a sport consumer sample (n = 787) in a mid-sized southeastern community. In order to validate the consumer-based brand equity model, a two-step confirmatory factor analysis approach confirmed the adequate fit of the measurement model to the observed data in both the goods and services context. Furthermore, the results from an examination of the structural model via structural equation modeling confirmed a significant relationship between brand awareness and brand associations as posited by previous research. Brand associations were found to have a significant impact on a consumer’s cognitive evaluation (brand superiority) and affective response (brand affect) to focal brands in both the goods and services context. Interestingly, brand associations were found to have an indirect relationship with consumers’ behavioral intentions (brand resonance) via brand superiority and brand affect. This finding revealed that two attitudinal constructs (brand superiority and brand affect) played a crucial role in the brand association-brand resonance relationship.

The findings in the current study have implications for sport brand managers and sport marketing scholars alike. It illustrates the powerful effect that strong brands can have on sport consumers in that the strongest brands will empower consumers to act as brand “evangelists” or “missionaries” (Keller, 2003). Sport consumers of strong brands will be compelled to continually learn about the brand and share their beliefs about the brand with other sport consumers. Brand resonance also provides sport marketers with a tangible goal to achieve in regards to their brand-building activities. Sport marketers can assess the degree to which consumers are “actively engaged” with their brand as well as how much effort consumers are putting forth to connect with other current and potential consumers of the brand.

From a practical standpoint, the results from both contexts highlight the importance of imparting brand associations into the mind of the consumer through marketing messages. For the sporting goods context, it is important to highlight the functional attributes of the product and the organization should attempt to impact what consumers think about the brand. Marketers of sporting goods products should highlight what aspects of the product are distinct from competitors. According to the model, this will impact perceptions of superiority of the brand by consumers.
For sport services brands, it is important to highlight the experiential, visceral benefits of product consumption. Marketers should focus their communication content on how it feels to consume the product and how these feelings are different from competitor brands. The model suggests that these types of thoughts will impact how consumers feel about the brand, a critical link to impacting their behavioral intentions.