The Identification-Engagement Model of Brand Community: Empirical Evidence from a Spectator Sport Context

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In recent years, the question of how to develop and manage brand communities has been a source of enduring debate in the literature (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005; McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002; Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001; Schau, Muñiz, & Arnold, 2009). Empirical research has provided support for consumers’ ability to engage, collaborate, and build a strong relationship not only with the focal brand, but also with other consumers (Algesheimer et al., 2005; McAlexander et al, 2002; Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001; Schau et al., 2009). In sport, marketers have acknowledged the importance of community-based relationship marketing and professional sport teams routinely organize fan communities where sport fans can come together, co-create social experiences, enhance their skills with customized products, and build camaraderie and friendship with other fans (McAlexander et al., 2002).

Despite the need for research that details the marketing effectiveness of brand communities, three important concerns with previous research limit our understanding. First, although past research provides three important markers of brand communities (i.e., shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and moral responsibility) (Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001), the relationships between these markers still remain unexamined. Second, previous studies have not provided a theoretical explanation of how consumers’ brand community identification leads to behavioral consequences, such as various community-related behaviors (e.g., social networking, voluntary participation in marketing programs, collaborative product customization). Third, despite repeated calls for understanding how brand communities are formed, most research has focused on the conceptualization (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001) and consequences (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Schau et al., 2009) of a brand community, ignoring the antecedents.

The purpose of this study is to address these concerns with previous research by developing a theoretical model that explains the antecedents and consequences of sport consumers’ community identification. Through the combined use of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1985) and the customer engagement perspective (van Doorn, 2010), we attempt to (1) develop the identification-engagement model of brand community in the sport context that includes the antecedents and consequences and (2) test the hypothesized relationships.

Three antecedents of community identification and community engagement were identified: perceived rituals and traditions (Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001), brandfest perceptions (McAlexander et al., 2002), and brand equity of the focal sport team (Carlson, Suter, & Brown, 2008). Also, three community-related behaviors were included as behavioral consequences: brand use, social networking, and impression management (Schau et al., 2009). We measured community identification and brand equity based upon previous research (Brady, Cronin, Fox, & Roehm 2008; Keller, 2003). The information supporting other constructs was primarily conceptual (Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001; Schau et al., 2009) and no established scale was available. Therefore, an initial pool of 29 items was generated for these factors based on the construct definitions. In order to assess content validity, four sport marketing researchers from four different universities conducted a content analysis. Keeping the construct definitions in mind, the judges were asked to evaluate the relevance of each item. This process eliminated eight items leaving 21 items.

Data were collected from spectators at a professional soccer event in a large-sized city in Japan. Questionnaires were distributed in the stands before the game started. From the 495 questionnaires distributed, 494 were returned for a response rate of 99.8%. Of these, 67 responses were rejected because many items were left blank, yielding a final usable response rate of 86.3% (n = 427). Of the total sample, 62.3% of the respondents were male. Age was measured through a categorical variable with grouping: approximately one-third of the subjects were in the 30-39 age range (30.4%) and 108 respondents (27.1%) were between 40 and 49 years old.
In order to assess the measurement models, we employed a confirmatory factor analysis. After eliminating one item with a small factor loading (< .50, Anderson & Gerbing, 1988), the construct reliability values ranged from .79 to .91, indicating the proposed constructs were internally consistent (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). Further assessment of convergent validity was conducted by an examination of average variance extracted (AVE). The computed AVE values ranged from .50 to .76, providing evidence of convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). In order to evaluate discriminant validity, we used a chi-square difference test and compared a model in which the correlation of each pair of the constructs was constrained to be equal one with an unconstrained model in which the correlation was permitted to vary freely (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). We performed a total of 28 chi-square difference tests for all pairs. Since every case demonstrated a significant difference, discriminant validity was indicated.

We further investigated the structural model using LISREL 8.52. The results indicated the proposed model was an acceptable fit to the data (CFI = .97; NNFI = .96; RMSEA = .076). The results of hypothesis testing revealed perceived rituals and traditions (gamma = .79, p < .01) and brand equity (gamma = .18, p < .01) had positive effects on community identification, which in turn positively influenced community engagement (beta = .62, p < .01). Brandfest perceptions did not have a significant impact on both community identification and engagement. The results also indicate community identification has positive effects on social networking (beta = .16, p < .01) and impression management (beta = .42, p < .01), while community engagement has positive effects on brand use (beta = .56, p < .01), social networking (beta = .74, p < .01), and impression management (beta = .56, p < .01). The variances explained for community identification, community engagement, brand use, social networking, and impression management were .78, .46, .40, .73, and .82, respectively.

This study sought to extend the literature by examining the antecedents and consequences of brand community identification and engagement. The results indicate consumers’ perceptions of rituals and traditions and brand equity of the focal team have direct effects on community identification and indirect effects on community engagement. From a practical standpoint, the study will assist marketers in determining the need for community-based relationship marketing which helps to build fans’ community identification, engagement, and community-related behaviors.