

## Brand Community Formation in Sports: An Interdisciplinary Approach

Bob Heere, University of Texas at Austin  
Laurence Chalip, University of Illinois

Marketing

Friday, May 31, 2013

20-minute oral presentation  
(including questions)  
(Room 406)

Abstract 2013-086

8:30 AM

Changes in technology and the advancement of the internet have created a society in which the consumer is able to undertake a more active role in creating and maintaining brand image of a product or service (de Chernatony, 2001). Consequently, it has become crucial for companies to create a community surrounding their brand in which consumers share a sense of ownership—one that allows them to gain a sense of meaning from their interaction with the community. Studies on brands such as Harley Davidson, Jeep, and Saab have uncovered lively communities, each with their own unique patterns of behavior that allow consumers to interact with the company as well as with each other (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Sport teams are no exception to this rule and are excellent illustrations of brand communities (Heere, Walker, Yoshida, Ko, Jordan, & James, 2011; Grant, Heere, & Dickson, 2011). Recent evidence suggests that the sense of community patrons obtain can predict loyalty better than either satisfaction (Drengner, Jahn, & Gaus, 2012) or financial incentives (Rosenbaum, Ostrom, & Kuntze, 2005). Findings like these have led to the suggestion that the value of a brand community derives from the active development of practices by consumers in the context of the brand community, which create brand equity and consequent value for the company (Schau, Muniz, & Arnould, 2009). What remains unexplored is how organizations can create situations in which these practices can occur.

The current discourse in (sport) marketing research has treated brand communities as a unique phenomenon, but that has been the case primarily because the discovery of community in brand contexts has been somewhat novel for marketers. In the absence of demonstrations to the contrary, it is parsimonious to expect that brand communities share characteristics in common with other kinds of communities, such as companies, schools, villages, cities, states, nations, and ethnicities. The only thing that clearly separates brand communities from other communities is their focal point, the brand. By beginning from the standpoint that brand communities are driven by similar processes as other communities, we can elaborate an interdisciplinary understanding of brand communities, which builds from social theory, psychology, anthropology, philosophy, political theory and history. The purpose of this article is to lay the necessary conceptual groundwork for work examining and promoting the formation of brand communities in sport. The framework that follows builds from current brand community research, and also draws from the broader literatures on community. The framework is intended to enable identification of the role of the different markers throughout the formation and maintenance of brand communities. Of particular interest is identification of the different mechanisms that could be implemented by companies to build brand communities. By drawing from theory and research about communities in other academic fields, we suggest a stage-based conceptual model for brand community formation. How individuals identify with these communities is key to our discussion. This is consistent with work on organizational identity, which has shown that identity can create positive outcomes that are also associated with community, such as attachment, loyalty, and supportive behaviors (Dutton et al., 1994; Foreman & Whetten, 2002; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). The interdisciplinary approach allows us to examine what markers trigger identity, through the consultation of anthropology, history and sociology, and consequently, social identity theory provides a theoretical lens to examine how the identity with the community resulting from these markers lead to psychological and behavioral outcomes.

Based on our interdisciplinary literature review, we identified four stages for community formation: 1) Coalescence of the community, 2) Development of the community, 3) Emerging Psychological properties of the community, and 4) Emerging Behavioral properties of the community. It is important to note that these stages are a-chronological, and certain elements from stage 3 and 4 can occur early in the existence of the community (A figure will be provided to illustrate this notion).

During the first stage, potential members of the community identify existential concerns and needs that could be addressed through the symbolic consumption of the brand (Dittmar, 1992). Once these needs are identified, members start locating resources for the community to come together. These resources are best identified through a

## **2013 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2013)**

discussion of 'capital', either social, cultural or economic (Bourdieu, 1986). During this stage, members start to establish a belief system that connects the overall existential concern or need with the brand. Finally, for the community to come into existence, the community needs to develop a communication system that allows existing and new members to interact and cooperate. During the second stage, many different components need to be addressed. These are: a) Empowerment of the community through equity and structure, b) Creating a social space for group experiences to occur, c) Developing traditions, rituals, and symbols for the community, d) Archiving and showcasing the history of the community, and e) Managing the relationship with associated and rival communities.

During the third stage, the different psychological properties that are associated with brand communities are discussed. The first psychological property is a shared identity with the cause, rather than the brand community. This sense drives members towards establishing the community in the first place. Then, once the community is established, the sense of community is discussed based on the multi-dimensional view on social identity (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004), further refining the concept of 'shared consciousness of kind' as proposed by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001). These authors also introduced the notion of 'moral responsibility', which is reviewed based on the work on loyalty (Pritchard, Havitz, & Howard, 1999). Finally, based on the notion of in-group and out-group identification, the concept of 'oppositional brand loyalty' is discussed. During the fourth stage, members start acting upon their identity and following behavioral practices as proposed by Schau, Muniz, and Arnould (2009). They identified thirteen practices: Justifying, Evangelizing, Empathizing, Welcoming, Governing, Badging, Documenting, Staking, Milestoning, Customizing, Grooming, Commoditizing, and the discouragement of opposite brands. The figure will demonstrate that these practices occur at different times of the brand formation process. For instance, justifying and evangelizing will occur even before the community is formed, while customizing and commoditizing will not occur until the community is well established.

This stage based conceptual framework could be of tremendous value for marketers in sport, whether this is elite sports (building a fan base), or participation sports (participant base), by serving as a checklist for community development.