

The Impact of our Senses on our Perception of the Brand Community

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Within sport marketing research, brand community research has gained much attention in recent years as it has provided us a framework with which to evaluate the strong relationship between sport teams and their fans. Sport teams, according to Heere, Walker, Yoshida, Ko, Jordan, and James (2011), have large groups of followers with a consciousness of kind, and when the team is underperforming, they engender a moral responsibility to the team. Yet despite all the research on brand communities within and outside the sport management setting, we still know little of how they are formed because most research on brand communities has focused on existing brand communities (e.g., McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn 2001). Underwood, Bond, and Baer (2001) suggested that a physical facility serves as the main social space where sport consumers gather to experience the brand community and that their perception of the servicescape (e.g., aesthetics, cleanliness, crowding, etc.) of the stadium plays a central role in overall game experience. To gain a full understanding of our perception of the servicescape, sensory research, attempting to measure our perceptions through our five senses (sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste) provides a valuable framework. A higher quality sensory experience is considered a key factor that can have a positive impact on consumer behavior (Lindstrom, 2005; Schmitt, 1999). This is why the world's most successful firms try to appeal to consumers' senses to construct competitive advantage. The purpose of this study is to understand how our senses affect our perception of brand community with a sport team. Specifically, this study explores empirically the linkages among sensory experience, team identity, and team loyalty.

Recognizing the importance of the sport consumers' sensory experience, Lee et al. (in press) proposed "the sensoryscape" model. By assuming a more multifaceted sensory perspective, the sensoryscape model extended the scope of the conventional sportscape. The sensoryscape scale consists of 5 sense dimensions with 22 items. Their study found that the overall sensoryscape construct (a combination of spectators' stadium experiences through all five senses) positively affected stadium experience satisfaction in both major and minor league baseball settings. While this finding is useful, it may be more valuable to understand which dimensions of the sensoryscape are more predictive in sport consumer behavior. It is important to note here that this distinction in the perception from different senses does not necessarily mean that five senses operate in isolation. It is widely recognized in cognitive psychology that there exists sensory interaction, suggesting that one sense influences another (Jones, 1986; Power, 1980).

Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) discuss the emotional attachment of consumers with a brand as "a consciousness of kind" that enables community members to share the concept of "we." Team identity seems to represent this concept in that both signify perceived similarity. Therefore, in this study, team identity serves as an indicator for consciousness of kind. In a similar vein, team loyalty is analogous to moral responsibility because both seek a sense of responsibility to the team's (the brand's) welfare. Taken together, team identity and team loyalty serve as key signifiers of brand community.

Regarding the effect of sensory experience on team identity, there has been no empirical study in the realm of sport consumer behavior. Recent work in brand research suggested that consumers' satisfaction with brands fosters their identification with brands (Kuenzel & Halliday, 2008). In the context of the stadium experience, Lee et al. (in press) identified that sensory experience positively affect spectators' satisfaction with the stadium. If sensory experience influences consumer satisfaction and the satisfaction affects brand identification, it is reasonable, by extension, to propose that the sensory experience is a potential antecedent of brand identification. Past studies in consumer behavior have suggested that sensory experience is a major predictor of brand loyalty (Brakus et al., 2009; Lindstrom, 2005). Lastly, previous studies in sport consumer behavior have demonstrated that team identity has a positive effect on team loyalty (Bodet & Bernache-Assollant, 2011; Wu, Tsai, & Hung, 2012). Taken together, it is hypothesized that each of the sensory experience dimensions will be correlated with one another. Each of the sensory experience dimensions is expected to positively affect both team identity and team loyalty. Finally, team identity is

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expected to positively affect team loyalty.

The participants in this study were 310 undergraduate students at two large public universities in the Southwestern United States. Female participants made up 42.3% (n = 131) and males 57.7% (n = 179) of the total sample. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 40 years (M = 21.5, SD = 2.5). Participants' sensory experience with their favorite team's facilities was measured with the Sensoryscape scale (5 dimension-22 items) developed by Lee et al. (in press). Participants rated each item of the Sensoryscape scale on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Team identity was measured with Trail and James' (2001) three items using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Team loyalty was measured by Heere and Dickson's (2008) four items using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was performed to measure the structural model - the relationships among the seven constructs (i.e., sight, sound, touch, smell, taste, team identity, and team loyalty) using AMOS. The structural model shows an acceptable fit to the data (CFI = .920; RMSEA = .065; SRMR = .076; Hu & Bentler, 1999). All correlations among the five dimensions of the sensoryscape were significant ($.30 < r < .57$, $p < .01$). Therefore, H1 was supported. Four (sight, sound, touch, and smell) of the five dimensions of the sensoryscape positively affected team identity. Three (sight, touch, and smell) of the five dimensions positively affected team loyalty. Therefore, H2 and H3 were partially supported. Lastly, the path between team identity and team loyalty was significant. Thus, H4 was supported. The structural model indicated that the five dimensions of the sensoryscape predicted 38.8% of the variance in team identity and that the five senses and team identity accounted for 57% of the variance in team loyalty.

This study empirically demonstrates that sport consumers' facility experiences through their senses play a substantial role in the formation of brand community. The study found that the effect of sight dimension on team identity was most significant followed by smell, touch, and sound dimensions. This study also revealed that the sight dimension was the most significant predictor of team loyalty followed by smell and touch. As expected, the study found that team identity had a positive impact on team loyalty. This implies that the sound dimension has only indirect impact on team loyalty via team identity while the sight, touch, and smell dimensions had a direct and indirect impact on team loyalty. In summary, team loyalty is a function of the four dimensions of the sensoryscape and team identity. The significance of the study is that sensory experience has not previously tested as a significant factor in the context of brand community because there are no reliable scale to measure it. The inclusion of sensory experience in the model may enable sport marketers to consider experiential aspects of sport consumers through their senses as a significant factor in building brand community.